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Nostalgia for Being Otherwise*

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THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY: ALBANIA'S  
GRECO-ILLYRIAN HERITAGE IN ISMAIL KADARE'S  
*AESCHYLUS OR THE GREAT LOSER*

INTRODUCTION: KADARE AND THE GREEKS

Despite rivalries and conflicts over land, tradition and history, Greek civilisation plays an important and constructive role in the work of Albanian writer Ismail Kadare. Greece, its people, influence and culture, constituted a presence for Kadare from an early age. Greek villages had existed for centuries, even millennia, in the vicinity of the southern Albanian town of Gjirokastra where he grew up. Greek names were common in these areas, and a level of bilingualism existed despite the restrictive language policies on either side of the border. Kadare later also visited the impressive archaeological ruins of Butrint near Saranda and elsewhere, and as a school student was exposed to the myths and legends of ancient Greece. Greece was felt in other, less felicitous, ways as well. Nine years old at the end of the Second World War, Kadare witnessed the ethnic conflicts and border disputes between Greeks and Albanians and remembers the arrival of desperate Greek communists seeking refuge from the civil war raging to the south. In the autobiographical novel, *Chronicle in Stone*, he documents the movements of Italian, Greek and German forces through his home town of Gjirokastra in southern Albania from the late thirties until the arrival of the communist partisans in 1944.

In his early novel, *The Monster* (1965), the legends of Troy become the archetypes of the European political imagination, transforming themselves throughout history into the present. The Horse of Troy lingers eternally outside the gates of the city, occupying the European consciousness as the original image of political terror. In *The Twilight of the Steppe-Gods*, the autobiographical novel of his student years in Moscow, Kadare befriends a character identified by the pseudonym of Petros Antaios. Antaios is a Greek communist who had sought refuge from the civil war over the

border in Gjirokastra and subsequently ends up a student alongside Kadare in Moscow in the late fifties. They meet at the Gorki Institute for World Literature, the premier training institute for the writers of the Soviet Union. Antaios educates and guides Kadare. It is the time of the Pasternak affair and the sceptical Greek communist provides a gloss on Khrushchev's cultural politics for the young Albanian poet. Antaios derives his pseudonym from the ancient Greek giant, whom Hercules could only overcome by lifting him off the ground, breaking the link with the earth from whom he gained his might. For the young Kadare he represents the chthonic consciousness, the bond to reality, which is the source of the writer's imagination. During the sixties Kadare would return to Greek myth in the form of the conflict between Prometheus with Zeus as a political allegory about the interrelationship of creativity and power under communism. Zeus' punishment of Prometheus, confinement in the depths of the abyss, becomes the dominant metaphor in the late works of the fate of the writer. Kadare continued to develop the figure of Prometheus from its origins in 1967 into the post-communist era in which he sought to foreshadow the redemption of his hero. In the post-communist play of 1996, *Bad Season on Olympus*, Kadare toys with the image of a Prometheus 'unbound' sharing power as the deputy and successor of Zeus.

Kadare's appreciation of Greek civilisation and culture however is nowhere more strongly evident than in the long literary essay, *Aeschylus or the Great Loser*, the first version of which dates back to 1985. Like all of Kadare's works and, indeed all works produced under a dictatorship, the *Aeschylus* essay must be read and understood with reference to its context, in this case the state of Albania in the crucial year of 1985. While Kadare's reading of Aeschylus was based on the ancient texts, he also had more pressing issues on his mind in that year. In the following essay Kadare's essay on the ancient Greek tragedian will be explicated primarily in terms of these contemporary concerns.

#### 1985: TRANSITIONAL YEAR

By the late 1970s, the signs were becoming clear that the wartime partisans and overseers of Albanian post-war reconstruction were growing old. In October 1973 Enver Hoxha celebrated his 65th birthday. But only hours before the lavish reception was to begin he was struck down by a cardiac arrest. A heavy smoker with diabetes, he was clearly entering the last phase of his life.<sup>1</sup> On New Year's Eve, December 31,

1975 Ismail Kadare's father died while the writer was in exile in the town of Berat. The passing of the Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung in the following year reminded those who had lived through the previous two decades of the suffering and the losses caused by the Cultural Revolution. In fact the alliance with Communist China was all but over by this stage as a result of Mao's rapprochement with the USA and the West in the early seventies. However the Chinese Cultural Revolution had been the model for Albania's national rebuilding from the mid sixties onward and Mao's death carried strong symbolic associations. Death and loss thus appeared to be the companions of the Albanian isolation which reached its peak in 1978 as the Chinese alliance finally ended, and Albania was set to go it alone in world communism.

History is the key to the novels and short fictional works of the late seventies. In *The Niche of Shame* (1976), *The Secular Chronicle of the Hankonis* (1976), *Broken April* (1978), *The Three-Arched Bridge* (1978) and *Doruntine* (1979), Kadare brings together literary allegory with the historical novel in a body of works depicting his country's past from the perspective of the present. In political exile in rural Myzeqe at this time, Kadare imagined Albania 'separated, isolated, in another era [...] like an orphan [...] at the mercy of fate.'<sup>2</sup> Approaching his forties, aware of mortality and the passing of time, he observed the full extent of the regime's desecration of Albanian traditions and history. Churches were destroyed, crosses ripped down and communist slogans scratched into the stonework.

Albania was disintegrating. You didn't need to be a clairvoyant in order to understand that communism, having thrown the country to the ground, was now emptying it of its substance. [...] Albania was coming undone before our very eyes.<sup>3</sup>

For this writer, beneficiary of communist modernization, whose life coincided with the building of the post-war communist state, the fate of Albania had become paramount. Kadare's disillusionment with communism had begun early. In *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods* he described his return as a young man from Soviet Russia to Albania in terms of the writer's pledge not to abandon his native language. Now, entering middle age in the wake of his nation's isolation from the world and amidst the reminders of mortality and the losses of the cultural revolution, Kadare sought a deeper engagement with the national identity that he saw betrayed by the communist regime.

Enver Hoxha made his last public appearance on November 28, 1984 for the celebration of Albanian National Day. With the grim expression of someone who had already entered into an agreement with death, against the usual communist custom, he did nothing to hide his despondency.<sup>4</sup>

The dictator lived out his last days in a state of dementia, one leg amputated, 'screaming throughout the night, terrified of the shades which he believed were passing through his room,<sup>5</sup> He died aged 76 on the night of April 10/11 1985. His nominated successor, Ramiz Alia, was elected by the Central Committee to succeed Hoxha as First Secretary although Nexhmije, Kadare's Lady Macbeth of Tirana, kept a steely grasp on the reins of power.<sup>6</sup> The death was announced the next morning. At the funeral on April 15, Ramiz Alia signalled to Albania and the world that Hoxha's political line would continue with no deviations. No changes in domestic or foreign policy should be expected. At this dangerous point of transition the regime clove to rigid orthodoxy in order to maintain stability. But what had Enverism achieved? After over forty five years in power, writes Edwin Jacques, the regime of Enver Hoxha still ruled over the poorest nation in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

1985 was a momentous year of change outside Albania too. In the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, the sorcerer's apprentice, took power as General Secretary, announcing a raft of changes to render socialism open, flexible and effective. But having cast the spell of freedom, he was unable to rescind it. Constitutional change, reform of parliament, restructuring of the bureaucracy, nuclear disarmament, rapprochement with the West, and withdrawal from Afghanistan followed, leaving the other communist regimes bewildered and increasingly out of touch. In Albania an atmosphere of pious mourning and rigid control set in as Ramiz Alia and Nexhmije attempted to maintain stability. In fact Enver Hoxha had done much of their work for them, having compelled an already politically docile populace through the use of terror and impoverishment to accept complete control, and eliminating those figures most likely to have created instability from within the ranks of the Party.<sup>8</sup>

#### ON THE WRONG SIDE OF HISTORY

In this environment Kadare wrote the first version of his essay, *Aeschylus or the Eternal Loser*, as the preface to an edition of the dramatist's works in early 1985. Hoxha had not yet died, but the signs of imminent death were clear to those on the inside. In 1988 Kadare revised and augmented the text and altered the name to *Aeschylus or the*

*Great Loser*. Sensing that history was about to be made again, Kadare began this first of the long literary-intellectual essays on the history, traditions and identity of the Albanians. In the context of the possibility of change, he presents a detailed, discursive rendition of his conception of Albania's culture, heritage and links to European civilisation. In this reading, Albania is a Balkan and European entity, linked at its origins with ancient Greece and unrelated to the Ottoman, Soviet and Slavic civilisations which subsequently threatened it. The essay is a powerful counter-interpretation of the past and the future of Albania, to that of the regime after the death of its only real leader. Gathering together themes and arguments about Albanian identity which he had developed since the early sixties, Kadare presents a reading of his country's culture which differs significantly from the official Albanianism of the regime. In his long discussion of the first great extant playwright of ancient Greece, Kadare finds proof of the deep cultural and civilisational links between Greece and Albania, and therein finds a powerful argument for Albania's claim to belong to the European sphere of civilisation despite five centuries of subjugation to the Ottoman Empire. Kadare's reading of ancient history and literature may be questionable in his literary and cultural essays, amounting in places more to an allegory of the national culture than an accurate philological study. However, with its intuition of the passing of an era, and its anticipation of the writer's need to prepare the ground for the nation's cultural and political future developments, *Aeschylus or the Great Loser* is a work of courage and imagination.

### *The Common Cultural Origins of Albania and Greece*

For Kadare a nation's identity is to be found in its language and literature. Literature represents national memory and the base level of literature is remembrance. Whether oral – where remembering was the single function – or written – where it has been overlaid with other functions – literature is primarily remembering. Without remembrance a community or a nation cannot move forward. However a literature and, with it, a nation, can be lost. This is what almost happened to Albania. Even dominant cultures lose huge amounts of their culture and history, as the loss of most of ancient Greek drama demonstrates. Small cultures are much more exposed to loss, and hence to the forgetfulness of the world. What hope was there for Albania after half a millennium of Ottoman occupation and a further half-century of global isolation under the communists?



As elsewhere in his work (such as *The Autobiography of the People in Verse* and *The Palace of Dreams*) Kadare posits an original 'Illyro-Albano-Greek' civilisation of the Balkan peninsula, which pre-dated the Slav migrations of the following millennium, and found expression above all in the epic songs of the Homeric tradition.<sup>9</sup> This civilisation was shared from the Ionian Islands to the plains of Kosovo and across to Thrace, and from the Accursed Mountains throughout the peninsula to mainland Greece, the Peloponnese peninsula and beyond to the islands of the eastern Mediterranean, to Ionia and Anatolia. It was a living tradition of oral literature throughout these lands, a form of expression which accompanied life through change and adaptation, incorporating and deleting, adding and modifying the collected body of human experiences.

This living literature represented memory. For Greek civilisation the war in Troy became the primal collective deed which tormented a people and generated the possibility of great literature through the discovery of tragedy. Literature – and the nation – was born of the recognition of the misuse of power and the loss of national innocence.

Like someone who suddenly remembers a misdemeanour committed in his youth, that he thought he had long since forgotten, the Greek people, having come to maturity, felt remorse for a crime committed at a young age. Eight hundred years earlier it had extinguished another people, the Trojans [...] This deed became the source of ancient Greek literature.<sup>10</sup>

The pre-literate, oral epic represented a civilisation that died in Greece with Aeschylus and the birth of drama. The new, modern form of literature was fixed, written down, and preserved. The end of the Homeric tradition in Greece was a product of, and charted the development of, new forms of human culture and society. The origins of Greek development can be traced back to the small historical window in history between the Persian Wars and the fall of Periclean Athens, during which time the oral, pre-historical culture of myth and Homeric rhapsody made the crucial step forward to the modern literary form of the tragedy and to the creation of a civic state. The exigencies of the city state in the period of Athenian florescence between the Persian Wars and the end of the Periclean era, determined the new literature. For Kadare, Aeschylus is the figure who forged the transitional path from the oral legacy of Homeric Greek to the written forms of modern literature.

The living, moving and changing medium of the epic was lost, but new forms of determinacy were gained. In Aeschylean drama, the unitary song fragmented into separate voices. The totality was lost, but the differentiation of the chorus and the protagonists was gained. In *The Persians*, Aeschylus splits the voices, putting the enemy onto the Greek stage. For the first time the point of view of the other is represented, and right is distinguished from ethnicity. Literary objectivity or irony enables the audience-members to remove themselves from their personal and communal attachments and view questions in terms of ethics and morality as well as ethnicity and identity. In representing the Persians on the Greek stage, Aeschylus discovered a new dialectic between literature and the community. In educating the Greeks to supersede simple identifications Aeschylus, for Kadare, is a patriot and a nation-builder of a higher order. However, the rulers of Athens objected to the representation of the Persians as a potentially destabilizing and seditious moment.

In the process of development of literary representation, drawing on the rich fund of legends from the area, Aeschylus sketched out the basic themes of political literature for Greek, and implicitly, Albanian, culture. *The Persians* introduces right and rights into the language of the state against the laws of belonging, power and control. Drama accompanied the political and social development of Athens, commenting on it and relating it to the broader concerns of human life. For the first time we can speak of an aesthetic education, or *paitheia*. In the *Prometheus* trilogy, of which only the first play, *Prometheus in Chains*, survives, Aeschylus gives expression to another archetypal theme of European political literature, the ancient political myth of the 'new man.' The play is about a conflict between the gods regarding the destiny of humanity. At stake is the survival of humanity or its annihilation in favour of a new race.<sup>11</sup> The wish to change humanity, to replace existing people with the 'new man' of utopian dreams and despotic control has been the aim of the worst tyrannies of human history. Aeschylus' love of humanity is translated into Prometheus' action to save that humanity despite its weaknesses and against the despotic wishes of the god.<sup>12</sup> Aeschylus thus uses the figure of Prometheus, saviour of mankind, to justify the ways of *man to god*, 'speaking truth to power' for the first time. Prometheus in this version is the Titan who conspired to save mankind from Zeus' disillusionment. Taking pity on humanity, he rebels against the calamity that his gift of divination allows him to foresee and that Zeus has planned for his first creation. The gift of fire is Prometheus' defiant act of compassion and belief in the possibilities of human development, in opposition to the supreme leader's apocalyptic disappointment,

absolute control, and sweeping intentions of total change. Prometheus is condemned for having stolen the celestial fire, but in fact his 'dossier' is based on the much broader crime of love of the human race.<sup>13</sup> His gifts to mankind, that 'crowd of benighted shadows' include memory, writing, thinking. 'In symbolizing rebellion and eternal martyrdom, the figure of Prometheus also embodies progress, the spirit of work, of civilisation and of free, creative thought.'<sup>14</sup> Prometheus is thus the archetypal modern rebel, who not only dared to defy the gods, but who condemned Zeus as a tyrant and predicted his fall. Giving mankind fire, he enabled existing, evolutionary (historical) humanity to evade the fate that Zeus intended, namely annihilation and replacement with a 'new man,' ideal, unchanging, and uncorrupted by history or the desire for self-determination. The old humanity, beloved by Prometheus, is the evolutionary (as opposed to the revolutionary) human being. Kadare's explication of the Prometheus myth is, of course, a late version of his own increasingly defiant advocacy of Albanian history and tradition against the modernizing sweep of the socialist agenda.

The implicit critique of the regime's reduction of Albanian history to a past stage, preceding and superseded by the revolutionary history of the new Albania and the new man, which we can identify in the earlier novel, *The Three-Arched Bridge*, is presented in the *Aeschylus* essay immediately after the death of Hoxha/Zeus, in the form of a literary-cultural thesis. In the two lost continuations of Prometheus' story, we know that the Titan finishes by obtaining Zeus' pardon in exchange for his revelation of the nature of Zeus' fall; and in the third part of the trilogy Prometheus reclaims his place on Olympus and becomes the god of artisans, ceramics and creativity. In the nineties, as part of his ongoing engagement with and debunking of the regime after its fall, Kadare wrote a continuation of the Prometheus story in his only drama, *Bad Season on Olympus*. Of all of Kadare's literary-political themes, that of the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus proved the most flexible and constructive in the writer's commentary on his relationship to the dictator and the regime. In this later play, the reinstatement of Prometheus represents a rapprochement between power and imagination, politics and art, after the stand-off of the preceding half century.

Where the *Prometheus* plays are concerned with the dialectic between power and humanity, the *Oresteia* give expression to an even more basic conflict in ancient Balkan cultures, between matriarchy and patriarchy, the personal and the social in the structuration of human society. The ancient law of the Furies, based on individual vengeance, is in decline and the new law of the Greek city-state, of Athena and

Apollo, based on a legal code, is becoming predominant. Where *Prometheus* is about power and human life, the *Oresteia* are about justice and vengeance. Aeschylus tackles a fundamental question of the urban-civil society of the Greeks, asking whether matriarchy or patriarchy, endogamy or exogamy, vengeance (vendetta) or justice (law) should be the foundation of human society.

One of the principal themes of the work is that of the primacy accorded to paternal or maternal ancestry. [...] This conflict is one of the foundations on which ancient as well as modern juridical codes are built and it has given rise to innumerable anonymous dramas in the history of humanity.<sup>15</sup>

In the environment of the Greek city-state Aeschylus found himself obliged to engage with political power in ways which involved new demands of and new dangers to literature. The written word, the individuation of voice, the introduction of moral conscience and plurality of perspective over and against the single voice of communal identity, represented a threat to political power which the writer had to negotiate. His position became precarious. Literature now existed – potentially – in opposition to power. It was a threat to and threatened by power. The writer could be forced into exile, the written word could be extinguished, and the text could disappear as a result of political censorship or the movements of history. Kadare had explored these themes as early as 1965 in the figure of the fictive Trojan poet Thremoh in *The Monster*. Censorship had become one of the determinants of writing. Politics was intervening in literature, manipulating and perverting life. Kadare imagines his embittered poet fleeing to the shores of Illyria or even further, in order to escape his country. But exile, whether self-imposed or under compulsion, is no solution to the writer in conflict with his political masters. ‘He would carry Greece and Greece would carry him.’<sup>16</sup>

And yet in this environment, too, Aeschylus shows a spirit of creative compromise. Far from being simply a dissident, he seeks to find an agreement with power. ‘A close reading of *The Persians* soon reveals Aeschylus’s desire to write a play which the authorities could accept. There is a clear concern for compromise.’<sup>17</sup> Aeschylus is not simply the voice of defiance of political authority. Why, asks Kadare, was the poet willing to submit to ‘the icy glare of the official standing opposite him?’<sup>18</sup> Was it through fear for his safety? No, he writes. It was because the great writer recognized the legitimacy of the state’s concerns. The Greek state was obliged to

protect itself from the dissolution that could arise as a result of the free play of the literary imagination in the political context of the threat from the Persians. The writer also had to represent the national interest, and the state had to limit the writer who acted too strongly against its interests in this situation.

The Greek tragedians were the first to take to heart the danger of an interpretation which was damaging to liberty. The interventions of censorship, the partiality of juries or of strategists were naturally a hindrance, but freedom without limits, leaving the spirit to roam unhindered, would turn out to be even more damaging to art. It would have bred a softness, a slackening, a thinning out which would have rendered impossible the tension and the pressure so necessary to the creation of a work of art.<sup>19</sup>

Aeschylus, like Kadare, was also a guardian of the state as the structure in which the Greek nation lived, regardless of its current regime. It is this concern for the role of the writer as nation-builder and as custodian of the ethnic community which is so compelling in Kadare's analysis. In the fifth century BC, Greece reached the evolutionary point where the rich anarchy of competing forces indicated a society in a state of ferment and change which must find a structure, or exhaust itself in the internecine struggles foreshadowed in Aeschylus's *The Seven against Thebes*. The Greek city-states remained fragmented even while under duress from foreign forces (in, for example, *The Seven against Thebes*). This disunity is reflected culturally in the contradictory and conflicting fragments of Greek myth and history. Cultural unity, and the possibility of political unity, were brought about through the creation of Greek tragedy as the unified cosmos of the nation. The synthesis of life and politics in Greek tragedy made possible the unified cosmos of the nation. Without the consolidating genius of tragedy, the anarchic cultural wealth of the Greeks would have exhausted itself, to become a conflicting and competing mass of cultural directions.

Kadare compares the Persians in Greece to the Ottomans in the Balkans, but reference to the Soviets in the early sixties in Albania, and to all imperialist or colonialist forces, is implicit in the argument. As the moral conscience and creative legislator of the people, the poet must also protect the nation-state from external as well as internal destructive forces:

Aeschylus doesn't forget that Greece was subjected to the attacks of a tyrannical state, backward in all respects, which, if it managed to conquer Greece, would have extinguished forever the light and the democracy which Greek culture and civilisation brought to the light of day.<sup>20</sup>

Aeschylus represents the point of transition from orality to literacy in Greek culture, a dangerous point, since it involved abandoning the old mode of transmission, which depended on human memory and moving to the new mode of writing as the means of committing to words the dramatic narrative. The danger of this new literature, for Kadare, was its fragility. War, invasion, occupation or cultural decrepitude could lead to irretrievable loss. Of the sealed stone epics of the fictive Trojan poet Thremoh in *The Monster* only half a line remains, discovered in the sand of the Tartar steppes, after the destruction of Troy and the disappearance of the Hittite civilisation which provided the exiled Trojan with temporary refuge. For Kadare, Aeschylus is both the originator and the 'great loser' of Greek literature, because he too suffered this fate. Of his seventy estimated plays, only seven remain as a result of the fact that the Emperor Hadrian centuries later called for an anthology of the best Greek dramas. Even Aeschylus survived only due to the intervention of one man who decided that a selection of his plays must be preserved through the cold mirror of Latin for the edification of Imperial Rome.<sup>21</sup>

The drama of Aeschylus was played out in the amphitheatres of Apollonia and Butrint (near modern-day Saranda) as well as in Athens and Delphi. Aeschylus' themes link the cultures of the Balkans as an original cultural neighbourhood. However the paths of the Greek and the Albanian world began to separate and diverge. The bedrock of the oral epic, which was common to both and to the European literary tradition, became obsolete in Greek literature with the new political and social developments. By the time of the Roman Empire Greek literature had made the transition to world literature, de-contextualized as classical high culture in Rome and for the succeeding centuries in the European Renaissance.

Albania's original twin, Greece, survived to become a modern linguistic and cultural entity while Albania did not. Albania did not have its Aeschylus. Its oral epic continued as a living literature, to be sure, but was threatened with diminution and loss. Like a wild flower it bloomed on the margins of European civilisation. But its time of floescence passed and it became dry and fossilized. Albania's heroic song did not make the transition to a literary culture until over two millennia later, when the

national awakening took place. But by that time, the heroic literature of antiquity had been fragmented, deformed and mutilated by centuries of regression, cultural servitude, dilution and subjection.

This was by and large the fate which befell Albanian epic. Not having been consigned to writing at the right moment in its history, Albanian epic reached the twentieth century seriously damaged, in some cases irreparably.<sup>22</sup>

The image of the lost moment in the creation of cultural unity is the key to Kadare's Albanian identity. The metaphors of frozenness, stagnation, and morbidity, which are repeatedly invoked in relation to Albania in Kadare's work, point to this state of cultural arrestation as the fundamental problem of Albanian identity. Against this, the particular political problems of the present, even of the socialist regime, are a symptom rather than a cause.

Aeschylus is thus not only poet, but judge of the nation and the affairs of men, conscious of moral as well as ethnic responsibility. It is this confluence of (social and individual) conscience with narrative which gives a new depth to Greek tragedy in Aeschylus. He is no longer a naive bard, but has become the modern writer whose role is active and engaged on behalf of the nation and humanity. Thus there are two forces at work within the great national work of art: the force of national responsibility, of unity in a cultural, linguistic and even political sense, and the force of human responsibility, of unity in the broader battle between civilisation and barbarism. The two fundamental questions of Kadare's own literary life, of belonging and judging, of ethnicity and right, are thus formulated by way of the figure of Aeschylus. These are the forces which determine Kadare's writing and which are the key to his work.

### *Albanian Traditional Culture and the Links to Europe*

In the remnants of Albanian culture Kadare finds the archetypal forms of the Greek myths and legends. In the *Kanun* are to be found the petrified remains of the Homeric social code based on vengeance, vendetta and *besa* (pledge of honour or promise), the core values of the warrior society. Here, matriarchy, the 'law of blood,' remains stronger than the legal codes of the patriarchal state which did not eventuate in Albania. In the marriage and funeral rituals of the *Kanun* are fossilized the ancient

tragic worldview of the original Balkan civilisation. The *Kanun* from being the living accompaniment of a developing culture, became the remnant of an ancient codification of laws and right. Kadare's view of the Kanun, expressed in a passage which is strongly reminiscent of the deserter's idyll in the earlier novel, *The General of the Dead Army* (1962), is strongly equivocal.

The tinkling of the bells, the barking of the shepherds' dogs, the sounds of the mill, of the forge, of discussions, of hunting parties and of marriage ceremonies, etc. are interrupted by the brutal sounds of death and violence: murders, atrocities, abductions, outrages at the table of the host, violations of hospitality, vendettas lasting for generations, defence of the taking of blood, followed by denunciations of the same practice, judgment by juries of elders, death ceremonies, tombs etc.<sup>23</sup>

Comparable to other primitive European legal codes in its origins, this traditional Albanian code of law represents for Kadare the legalistic spirit, the aspiration of the nation for order and structure. However it became rigid during Albania's lost years. 'A true encyclopaedia of greatness and of unreason, it is as logical as it is illogical, as tragic as it is grotesque.'<sup>24</sup> Devoid of the literary-narrative spirit, that evolving and humanising life-force against the dead letter of the law, the *Kanun* remains Albania's only code of law and the nation, but, like the epic songs which chronicle the nation's history and identity, it has been damaged by history.

Just as the stagnation of the late Roman and post-imperial era was coming to an end with the developments on the peninsula of the fourteenth century, the Ottoman invasion occurred, closing the nation off from its European roots for a further five hundred years. Albanian socialism, promising a break with the spirit of Eastern unfreedom in 1961, succumbed to its own form of self-disenfranchisement, cutting itself off and leaving only the writer to remember the moribund links with European civilisation. For Kadare, the modern Albanian writer inherited a stagnated literary, cultural, and national identity. After the long Middle Ages under the Ottomans, modernity arrived in the form of ethnic nationalism, and modernization came about in the form of a brutal Stalinism masquerading as nationalist communism. Ethno-national identity has survived the history of oppression, brutalization and marginalization from the mainstream of Europe, but the forms it has taken are damaged and sterile.



## ALBANIA, GREECE AND EUROPE

Kadare is not just interested in literary history. *Aeschylus* is a version of Kadare himself in this essay in which the writer's gratitude to the European tradition, maintained throughout the years of the dictatorship and throughout the centuries of national oppression, takes the form of a willing identification with the great writer of the Greek transition from oral to written culture. As was the case with Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz and other members of the Central and Eastern European literary intelligentsia, Kadare's sense of socio-political exclusion from Europe heightened his appreciation of the values of European literature and civilisation.<sup>25</sup> Unlike these writers of Central Europe, however, the Balkan writer does not have access to a European heritage of the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Kadare is obliged to dig much deeper into history to find the European origins of the Albanians. The shared original 'Greco-Illyrian' culture was the foundation stone of Europe, but the bond with the Greeks was broken a long time in the past. The fear of annihilation and the threat of loss of Albanian identity, which is expressed in terms of desperation in the final pages of *The Three-Arched Bridge*, is allayed by the hope of re-discovery of, and reconnection with, Europe. The signs of hope that change is possible, that all is not lost, are palpable during the second half of the eighties. Nothing would change after the death of Enver Hoxha, the Party declared, but figures such as Kadare knew also that nothing would ever be the same.

Conscious of his obligations to both the nation and to humanity, bridging the millennia-old break between Illyro-Albanian culture and the new age in which rapprochement with Europe might again be possible, Kadare is *Aeschylus*. The modern Albanian writer begins the long process of transition, seeking to retrace his and his nation's path to modernity amid the conflicting demands of individual, ethnic and state identity. The novel, that essentially European form with its origins in the Homeric epic, which speaks of 'the relativity and ambiguity of things human' and is incompatible with the 'one single Truth' of the totalitarian universe, survived the Hoxha era.<sup>26</sup> Kadare's reading of ancient history and culture may be questionable, amounting more to an allegory of the national culture than a history of ancient Greek literature, but with its intuition of the passing of an era, and its anticipation of the writer's need to prepare the ground for the nation's cultural and political future developments, *Aeschylus or the Great Loser* is the work of a dynamic and constructive imagination at a time when so many writers were expressing the loss of creativity under communism.

In the *Aeschylus* essay Kadare develops his imaginative evocations of Albanian identity into a programmatic literary history of the southern Balkans, the original Greek and Illyrian civilisation of Homeric antiquity. Sensing the imminent death of the dictator and realizing that nothing would be the same, no matter how controlled the transition to the new leader, Kadare set about consolidating his alternative vision of Albania. Like the 1984 novel, *The Shadow*, *Aeschylus* is already a work of transition. Enver Hoxha's death did not signal the end of the dictatorship, and in 1985 the regime seemed as strong as ever. However the force of Hoxha's personality was such that his death represented a major point of transition. Not, of course, to democracy and the end of the dictatorship, but certainly to a changed regime. It took another four years for those in and close to power to realize that even Albanian socialism would have to change. Enver Hoxha had left behind a much less charismatic, powerful, and ruthless figure than himself in Ramiz Alia. As a member of the Politburo and, since 1982 as second-in-command, Alia was a long-term collaborator in the crimes of the dictatorship. The formidable Nexhmije was still firmly in control in the background, and an ambitious younger generation was lining up for power. However figures such as the new Minister for the Interior, Hekuran Isai, were of a different cast to Mehmet Shehu and Kadri Hasbiu. Whether they would be able to maintain the rule of steel, even if they wanted to, was open to debate.

Unlike Greek history, Albanian history is characterized by loss, beginning in the period of the Norman conquests, after which the movements towards Albanian proto-national identity failed in the context of the fragmentation of Byzantium and the incursions of the first Ottoman forces into the Balkans in the second half of the 14th century. After the collapse of the Ottoman empire some five hundred years later, Albanian independence flickered briefly after national liberation in 1913, through the failed democracy of Fan Noli and into the dependency on fascist Italy under the monarchy of King Zog. It ended with the Italian occupation in 1939. Communism released the country from war but plunged it into renewed isolation and backwardness, especially after the break with Moscow in 1961.

Drawing on the emotional and spiritual foresight of the artist in 1985, the year of change, Kadare sensed that nothing would again be as it was. And, in anticipation of new directions, he set about creating the intellectual and spiritual environment for a new and more profound re-attachment of Albania to its European heritage. Far from being a claim for cultural primacy, his posited Greco-Illyrian culture of the Balkan peninsula represents a late claim for membership of Europe after a history

of exclusion which began already with the abandonment of Albania by the Romans at the time of the barbarian invasions. The shared experience of ancient Greek civilisation and culture provides the base on which Kadare builds his claim for Albanian membership of Europe.

The broadening of the European Union, in particular the foreshadowed inclusion of countries from the former socialist Eastern Europe, strengthened the writer's resolve to work towards the restitution of Albania's European cultural heritage during the nineties. Where earlier the use of Greek myths such as Prometheus represented a provocation to the communist government's atheism and nationalism, now it gained an added significance. The detailed study of the common roots and the shared themes of Albanian and Greek culture contributed to the writers' vision of a new and committed rapprochement with Europe. No longer hindered by his early belief the necessity of communism as a modernizing force, or by the later resentment at the failure of Europe to have acted to save Albania from the East, Kadare established Albania's European credentials and his European voice in the essay on Aeschylus. With an eye on the European Union in the 2006 essay, 'The European Identity of the Albanians,' Kadare reiterated the need for Albania to be re-included into Europe. Having been excluded twice already, in the late fourteenth century and in 1944, it would be a catastrophe if Albania were excluded from Europe a third time.<sup>27</sup> History is at fault, he writes in *The Weight of the Cross*, but so is the ignorance and the arrogance of Europe and the West.<sup>28</sup> In the new millennium, studies of Dante and Shakespeare would follow in the writer's ongoing explication of the Europeanness of his nation.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Thomas Schreiber, *Enver Hodja: Le sultan rouge* (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1994), 204-05.
- 2 'Séparée, isolée, dans une autre époque [...], comme une orpheline [...] à la merci du destin.' Ismail Kadaré, *Dialogue avec Alain Bosquet*, trans. by Jusuf Vrioni (Paris: Fayard, 1995), 62. Translations throughout are my own unless otherwise stated.
- 3 'L'Albanie se désagrègeait. Nul besoin d'être très clairvoyant pour comprendre que le communisme, après l'avoir jetée bas, la vidait de sa substance. [...] L'Albanie se défaisait sous nos yeux.' Ismail Kadaré, *Invitation à l'atelier de l'écrivain*, suivi de *Le poids de la croix*, trans. by Jusuf Vrioni (Paris: Fayard, 1991), 400-01.
- 4 'La mine lugubre, comme s'il avait déjà passé contrat avec la mort, contrairement à tous les usages du communisme, il ne faisait rien pour dissimuler sa morosité.' Kadaré, *Invitation/Le Poids* 542.
- 5 'Sombrant dans le démente, amputé d'une jambe, hurlant toute la nuit, terrifié par les ombres qu'il croyait voir défilier dans sa chambre, le dictateur vivait ses derniers jours.' Kadaré, *Invitation/Le Poids* 547.
- 6 In 1987 Kadare wrote a poem entitled 'Lady Macbeth's Soap.' Maks Velo, Velo, Maks, *La Disparition des 'Pachas rouges' d'Ismail Kadaré: Enquête sur un 'crime littéraire'*, trans. by Tedi Papavrami (Paris: Fayard, 2004), 154.
- 7 Edwin E. Jacques, *The Albanians: An Ethnic History from Prehistoric Times to the Present* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 1995), 644.
- 8 'Of the 14 members of the Central Committee, elected when the Party of Labour was founded as the Albanian Communist Party in 1941, Hoxha was the only one still alive; 14 of the 31 members of the Central Committee elected in 1944 had been 'liquidated' and only nine remained in office; of the original 109 members of the National Assembly, 17 had been shot, 15 had been imprisoned, two had committed suicide, and only 29 were still politically active.' Owen Pearson, *Albania in the 20th Century*, vol. 3, *Albania in Dictatorship and Democracy: 1945-1999* (London: I.B. Tauris/Centre for Albanian Studies, 2006), 573.
- 9 Pipa challenges Kadare on this theory of the origins of Albanian epic song. According to Pipa this culture originated in (Slav) Bosnia, and from there traveled to Kosova and Northern Albania, where it was modified considerably in accordance with the Northerners' psychology and traditional mores. 'In its anti-Yugoslav hysteria dating from Albania's break with Yugoslavia, Albanian Stalinism appropriated the nationalistic thesis that South Slavs borrowed the rhapsodies in question from the Albanians, going so far in this direction as to claim as an Albanian Milos Obilic, the Serbian hero of the battle of Kosova. Kadare's novel [*The File on H-PM*] upholds the official thesis. Two Irish folklorists travel to Northern Albania to collect the rhapsodies in question. The conclusion of their study is that the rhapsodies are remnants of a medieval poem which disintegrated during the centuries-long Ottoman occupation, a thesis likewise maintained (but with regard to Southern Albanian folk songs) by the Italo-Albanian poet De Rada. Kadare appropriates De Rada's thesis, applying it to the Northern Albanian rhapsodies.' Arshi Pipa, *Contemporary Albanian Literature*, East European Monographs 305 (Boulder: East European Monographs; New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 94.
- 10 Ismail Kadaré, *Eschyle ou le grand perdant*, rev. and exp. ed., trans. by Jusuf Vrioni (Paris: Fayard 1988). While Kadare revised and added material for this edition, the substance is largely unchanged from the original version, *Eschyle ou l'éternel perdant*, of 1985. 15-16.

- 11 Kadaré, *Eschyle* 88-89.
- 12 Kadaré, *Eschyle* 90.
- 13 Kadaré, *Eschyle* 91.
- 14 'Ainsi, tout en symbolisant la révolte et le martyr éternels, la figure de Prométhée incarne-t-elle aussi le progrès, le génie du travail, de la civilisation et de la libre pensée créatrice.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 92.
- 15 'L'un des thèmes principaux de l'œuvre est celui de la primauté reconnue à l'ascendance paternelle ou à l'ascendance maternelle. [...] Ce débat est l'un des points fondamentaux sur lesquels ont été édifiés tous les codes juridiques anciens et récents, et il a suscité, dans l'histoire de l'humanité, des drames anonymes sans nombre.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 102.
- 16 'Il porterait la Grèce et la Grèce le porterait.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 185.
- 17 'Une lecture attentive des Perses révèle bien vite le désir d'Eschyle de composer une pièce que les autorités pussent accepter. Le souci du compromis y est apparent.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 71.
- 18 'Le regard glacé du fonctionnaire qu'il avait en face de lui.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 72.
- 19 'Les tragiques grecs furent les premiers à prendre conscience du péril d'une interprétation abusive de la liberté. Les interventions de la censure, la partialité des jurys ou des stratèges étaient naturellement gênantes, mais une liberté sans limites, laissant l'esprit vaguer à sa guise, se serait sans doute révélée encore plus néfaste pour l'art. Elle aurait engendré une mollesse, un relâchement, une dispersion qui eussent rendu consécutivement impossibles la pression, la tension si indispensables au façonnage de l'œuvre d'art.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 79-80.
- 20 'Eschyle n'oublie pas de rappeler que la Grèce subissait l'attaque d'un Etat tyrannique, arriéré à tous égards, qui, s'il venait à la soumettre, éteindrait à jamais la lumière et la démocratie à laquelle sa culture et sa civilisation avaient donné le jour.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 74.
- 21 'Le froid miroir latin.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 166.
- 22 'Tel fut le sort qui échut dans une certaine mesure au gros de l'épopée albanaise, qui, n'ayant pas eu la chance d'être consignée par écrit au moment opportun, parvint jusqu'au XXe siècle gravement mutilé, parfois jusqu'à l'irréparable.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 79.
- 23 'Des tintements de sonnailles et des aboiements de chiens de berger, des bruits de moulin, de forge, des débats, des parties de chasse, des cérémonies nuptiales, etc., sont interrompus par l'intervention brutale de la mort et de la violence: meurtres, atrocités, enlèvements, outrages à la table d'hôte, violations de l'hospitalité, vendettas se perpétuant de génération en génération, justification de la reprise du sang, puis dénonciation de la même pratique, jugement par le jury des anciens, cérémonies mortuaires, tombeaux etc.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 113-14.
- 24 'Véritable encyclopédie de la grandeur et de la déraison, il est tout aussi logique qu'illogique, tragique que grotesque.' Kadaré, *Eschyle* 113.
- 25 Milan Kundera, 'The Tragedy of Central Europe,' *The New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984, 33-39, repr. in Gale Stokes, ed., *From Stalinism to Pluralism: A Documentary History of Eastern Europe since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 216-23.
- 26 'As a model of this Western world, grounded in the relativity and ambiguity of things human, the novel is incompatible with the totalitarian universe. This incompatibility is deeper than the one that separates a dissident from an apparatchik, or a human rights campaigner from a torturer, because it is not only political or moral but *ontological*. By which I mean: the world of one single Truth and the relative, ambiguous world of the novel are moulded of entirely different substances. Totalitarian Truth excludes relativity, doubt, questioning; it can never accommodate what I would call *the spirit of the novel*.' Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 13-14.

27 'Je suis originaire d'un pays européen qui a été exclu de l'Europe à deux reprises. La première fois, au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, lorsqu'il est tombé sous l'occupation ottomane en même temps que le reste des Balkans. La seconde fois, en 1944, quand il est tombé sous la dictature communiste. Manquer l'Europe une troisième fois serait catastrophique pour l'Albanie.' ('I am a native of a European country which has been excluded from Europe twice over. The first time, in the fifteenth century when it fell under Ottoman occupation along with the rest of the Balkans. The second time in 1944 when it fell under the communist dictatorship. To miss Europe a third time would be catastrophic for Albania.') Kadaré/Bosquet 202.

28 Kadaré, *Invitation/Le Poids* 540-41.