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Translation and Dictatorship: the Case of Ismail Kadare

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In 1986 Ismail Kadare finished his great personal reckoning with the Albanian dictatorship in *The Shadow*, begun two years before. The dictator had died the previous year and the manuscript of the novel remained secreted in the writer's apartment. But the writer was exposed and vulnerable in the environment of morbidity and transition as various figures vied for power in the interregnum. Disguising the manuscript as a translation, Kadare managed to smuggle it out of the country on an official trip to Paris. The names were rendered German throughout and the location switched from Paris to Vienna. On the cover was the title, *The Three K's*, along with the byline, "translated from the German of Siegfried Lenz". But as Kadare notes, the disguise was thin, and was designed primarily for the inspectors at the airport, should his hand-luggage be searched.¹ Even the German title is ironic with its play on the ubiquitous Kafka, and its reference to the three central figures of the novel as one, the writer himself. In Paris, the manuscript was consigned to the safety of a bank vault by Claude Durand, the French publisher and helmsman of the Fayard press, with the authorization to re-open it when he thought it appropriate.² The subtext of the agreement was, however, that the novel should not be published until after Kadare's death, as Kadare notes in his interview with Alain Bosquet: 'mon contrat avec lui était clair: le roman ne devait être publié qu'après ma mort' ('my contract with him was clear: the novel should only be published after my death').³ Claude Durand confirms that this included the possibility of "accidental" death in Albania or France.

The translation as the cover for a powerful and deeply subversive work of literature? The irony was not lost on Kadare. He owed his life to translations and, indirectly, to the act of translating. The story of the mock translation of a novel by Siegfried Lenz, the slightly left-of-centre spokesman for middle-class West Germany, allows us to focus our attention on the fragility and the strength of the written word in the dictatorial environment and on the importance of translation to the writer's survival in such an environment. Translation did indeed become a metaphor of survival for Kadare. He came to recognize that his literary mission to

¹ Ismail Kadaré, *Dialogue avec Alain Bosquet*, trans. Jusuf Vrioni (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 83.

² Claude Durand, "Note de l'éditeur", preface to Ismail Kadaré, *La Fille d'Agamemnon* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), pp. 7-9.

³ Kadaré/Bosquet, p. 52. Durand, p. 8, confirms that this included "accidental" death in Albania.

speak on behalf of Albania from inside his native land under the Hoxha dictatorship *depended*, ironically, on translation.

Translation, literally “moving” of a text “from one place to another”, can be traced throughout Kadare’s work as a metaphor for the process of moving back and forth between Albania and Moscow in the early works and, after 1970, between Albania and Europe, the centre of gravity for literature, narration and, ultimately, life. In the battle of the literary word against the dogmatic word, translation becomes the means of saving the literary word, of saving one’s life in Kadare’s second chronology, the literary-cultural chronology of the writer. In the works from the seventies onward, Albania is imagined as a place of death. Through translation, Kadare could stay in touch with the world of the imagination (outside Albania’s borders) from the world of the dead letter (of Albanian communism). He could continue to speak as though he were alive.

But translation was not just a metaphor, an image for the recognition of the necessity of communication with the outside world in order for him to survive as a writer – and, indeed, literally to stay alive in an environment where writers were killed by the hundreds for the most trivial transgressions. Translation became a part of the chess-game, the battle of wits to speak, on behalf of his nation, both to his compatriots and to the world.

In the tiny, closed Albanian environment, translation was part of a huge literary-political undertaking to convince the world of the truth of Enverism, the dictator’s personal amalgam of communism and nationalism. The Hoxha regime supervised an ambitious propaganda network, broadcasting and translating material globally in an astounding range of languages. Kadare’s work, *The General of the Dead Army* was officially translated into French in Albania by the bilingual ex-prisoner and member of the Albanian landed gentry, Jusuf Vrioni, and was published in Paris in 1970. Hoxha’s strategy at this time was still to keep Kadare under control, allowing him the freedom to publish selected works, but making sure that his influence in Albania itself was strictly supervised. The events of 1970 surprised him, no doubt. For Kadare’s novel was much better received than Hoxha expected, and while Hoxha was deeply flattered by the attention paid to his favored writer by the French literati, demonstrating to the world that he was not some thug from the backblocks of Eastern Europe, the move backfired. As a result of the publication of *The General* in France in 1970, Kadare became a name on the world stage of Eastern European dissidents. He could not be summarily executed like the hundreds of other unknown writers in communist Albania. Kadare had gained a margin in which to operate. His texts were potentially dangerous outside Albania, and Enver Hoxha came to realize that he, the dictator, too was playing a dangerous game, fighting with fire. The myth of Prometheus is never far from Kadare’s literary-political imagination.

In this very specific dictatorial environment, however, translation took on a further role for Kadare. Undertaken by trusted practitioners, in particular Jusuf

Vrioni and later, Tedi Papavrami, it became for him the only way of safeguarding his work in the versions that he wanted.

In Albania Ismail Kadare's works were published in various forms and formats. While publication of important manuscripts was withheld for political reasons, many of the works were drafted and redrafted as short stories, censored, revised, confiscated, reworked and passed through the complex filters of comment, feedback and revision of the communist state. Given the nature of the regime, the absence of pre-publication censorship, and the complexity of the assessment and publication process, the progress of works towards publication could take years and involve substantial revisions. It was dangerous and incriminating to keep drafts and copies. In a country where all forms of mechanical reproduction were guarded, Kadare could not always keep copies. Not only was transmission by no means assured; the very existence of manuscripts was fragile. Kadare claimed that the manuscript of his dissident poem of 1975, "The Red Pashas", for example, had disappeared into the vaults of the security police after being submitted for publication. Others asked whether it had ever existed, suggesting that Kadare, like Christa Wolf some time earlier, was attempting to gain dissident status in retrospect. The poem was discovered in the vaults of the national Archive of Albania by the (ex-)director Shaban Sinani in 2002.⁴ The controversy over this work reveals the extent to which texts were vulnerable in an environment of secrecy, seizure and confiscation.

While some works could be altered superficially for the literal-minded dogmatists of the regime without substantially altering their critical content, others could not. *The Great Winter*, Kadare's controversial socialist realist novel of 1973, underwent numerous readings and revisions by members of the highest echelons. Its idealization of Enver Hoxha at the Moscow conference of 1961 ensured its survival in one form or another. The original title was changed from *Winter of Great Isolation*, and episodes were inserted to emphasize the heroic deeds of the partisans in the late years of the war. The ending was changed to include a cosmic view of the flow of Albanian history. But with each change, the critical content just became more and more obvious to any close reader. The novel begins with a snowstorm in which people are struggling to survive and it ends with a snowstorm in which people are struggling to survive. Nevertheless the novel's ironies somehow remained lost on those responsible for censoring them. One of the keys to understanding Kadare is to accept that he at some level enjoyed the battle of wits. One is reminded of the German poet Heinrich Heine's famous lampoon on the censorship of the German Restoration period in *Ideen. Das Buch Le Grand*:

⁴ Maks Velo, *La Disparition des "Pachas rouges" d'Ismail Kadaré: Enquête sur un "crime littéraire"*, trans. Tedi Papavrami (Paris: Fayard, 2004), p. 201.

Die deutschen Censoren [The German censors]

Dummköpfe [idiots]

Kadare's translator, Jusuf Vrioni, scion of one of Albania's oldest and grandest families, captured and imprisoned after unwisely returning to his native land in search of a lost love, chose translation as his profession. This gifted bilingual had escaped execution and subsequently was able to survive as a translator because of his linguistic ability. Chosen to translate Enver Hoxha's memoirs into the language par excellence of European culture, Jusuf Vrioni became merely the anonymous conduit for this Balkan dictator and snob. For Kadare, however, Vrioni lifted the heavily guarded borders of Albania, enabling the writer's passage to the havens of France. Kadare closely supervised the translations, especially later on, but he did not have the linguistic capacity to undertake them himself.

Kadare in fact had greater control over the translated texts, especially once they were safely housed in France, even if still unpublished, than he did over his texts in their original language. He deliberately used France and his network of friends there to store manuscripts that were interfered with and over which he had less control in his native land. In a curious way, the translations became the works proper, the *Ausgaben letzter Hand*, safe from the last-minute changes, additions and deletions of editorial hands, and a more reliable document than the Albanian originals.

The years from 1982 until 1986 were particularly fraught with danger for Kadare. In 1982 Kadare had been put before a large open tribunal and tried on account of *The Palace of Dreams*, his most blatantly critical novel. Subsequently, he was harassed in ways that presaged no good. While Hoxha was alive, Kadare was protected, used by the dictator as a pawn in the game of divide and rule, while he himself, the writer, focused on the greater game of who would speak with the true voice of the Albanians. At this time Kadare was urged by the regime to undertake a visit to Paris. While he was there he was advised indirectly that he would be tried on his return for pro-Western activity. The feint failed and Kadare returned in spite of his government's attempt to expel him to a country where he was known, but not in the public eye, and where his death would pass relatively unnoticed, as had so many others. According to Claude Durand, Kadare did not believe that he would live to see the end of the regime. The well-known and respected literary commentator Bernard Pivot, remarked pointedly in the influential French magazine, *Lire*, "It's Kadare himself that we want to see on French

television, not his decapitated head.”⁵ Even at this late stage of Eastern European socialism, Albania was hermetically closed to the outside world: it had not participated in the changes that rendered most of the other socialist countries more or less porous to influences from the West. Albania never experienced post-totalitarianism. In April 1985 Hoxha died from advanced diabetes, a demented blinded amputee, screaming at the ghosts parading through his darkened chambers. Not Lear, but Macbeth, was for Kadare, the image of the corrupted ruler. During this period the Albanian dictatorship was at its most closed, with the hawkish wife, ex-partisan, and Director of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, Nexhmije, the last of the old guard, watching closely over the process of transition. The other remnants of the wartime partisans had been eliminated over the previous years.

The Shadow defied Aesopian expression or censorship and had to remain secret. Its publication, even in translation, would have meant the end for Kadare. Here Kadare turned his critical vision inward, observing mercilessly the degrading and corrupting effects of political dictatorship and of his own decision, taken decades earlier, to remain in the country of his birth, to do what needed to be done, in order to keep writing for his countrymen and women. In *The Shadow* Kadare observes his own divided consciousness under the dictatorship. The narrator is a privileged but untalented member of the artistic *nomenclatura* who secretly loathes the Party and who lives for his trips to France. His friend, a gifted writer, held at a certain distance by the Party as a result of the brilliance and the independence of his work, plays an important role as a narrative *alter ego*. Both reflect aspects of Kadare’s existence, the cynical apparatchik and the creative dissident. The evocation of the demented fantasies of the supreme leader whom Kadare had observed so closely for the duration of his life, gives this complex and difficult work of introspection a powerful political force.

Ironically, this work marked the end of the era of translation as a life-saving strategy for Kadare and the first, premonitory move towards reassertion of the primacy of the original text. Perhaps the writer intuited that nothing would ever be the same after Hoxha’s death.

Kadare’s novels and stories are now becoming better known outside Albania primarily through the French, and more recently, the German and English translations. The Australian writer and academic, Nicolas Jose, has suggested that neglect of literary translation might be “a symptom of a deeper failure to engage constructively with the rest of the world”. The story of Ismail Kadare represents a stark reminder that engagement can, in some contexts, be a matter of life and death. Far from lost, Ismail Kadare was saved in translation.

⁵ Ismail Kadaré, *Invitation à l’atelier de l’écrivain, suivi de Le poids de la croix*, trans. Jusuf Vrioni (Paris: Fayard, 1991), p. 529. Cf. Élisabeth Champseix and Jean-Paul Champseix, *L’Albanie ou la logique du désespoir* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1992), p. 209; Ismail Kadaré, “La Vérité des souterrains”, interview with Stéphane Courtois, *Le Dossier Kadaré*, ed. Shaban Sinani, trans. Tedi Papavrami (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006), pp. 168-169.