

Ismail Kadare: Writing under Dictatorship

PETER MORGAN

In a French television interview in 1991 Bernard Rapp, the influential moderator of the discussion show *Caractères*, introduced his guest, the Albanian writer Ismail Kadare, as a potential Nobel Literature prize laureate.¹ Kadare was already very well known in France and Europe as a writer and commentator on Albanian affairs, with a large number of novels, literary essays and stories available in French, Greek, Serbo-Croatian, Italian, German, and other languages. He had sought exile in France as the Albanian socialist regime collapsed in 1990. However Rapp's suggestion of a Nobel Prize unleashed decades of pent-up suspicion of this writer who had lived, written and survived, apparently unscathed, in the Albania of Enver Hoxha, probably the most ruthless of the socialist dictators.

In a review in the *New York Review of Books* in 1997 the highly respected commentator on Balkan affairs, Noel Malcolm, summed up these suspicions, and condemned Kadare for opportunistically responding to the regime in order to survive as a privileged member of the Albanian ruling class. Malcolm concluded with a devastating pun on the title of Kadare's best-known novel, *The Palace of Dreams*. Kadare, he wrote, remained 'an employee of the Palace of Nightmares that was Enver Hoxha's Albania'.²

Few leapt to the writer's defense. Western critics of communism spoke in disparaging terms of Kadare's failure to step into the shoes of a Vaclav Havel or Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Kadare, it seemed, would become another trophy on the wall of the post-communist dissident

* Professor Peter Morgan is Director of European Studies at the University of Sydney. This paper is adapted from his inaugural lecture delivered to the Arts Association on 19 August 2010.

hunters, along with Christa Wolf, Heiner Müller, Sascha Anderson and so many others. At issue was the track record of a writer who had stayed in the communist block and had attempted to tread the fine line between compliance and dissidence.

I myself first came across the work of Ismail Kadare in the early 1990s when I read and subsequently set *The Palace of Dreams* as a text for a course on contemporary Europe. Reading these accusations and recriminations during the nineties, I had a strong sense that these critics were doing the writer an injustice. My subsequent research on Ismail Kadare and the political history of the Albanian dictatorship led me to Albania and to Kadare himself, his colleagues, friends, critics and enemies in an attempt to establish the truth about this extraordinary literary figure.



Figure 1: Ismail Kadare and Peter Morgan, Paris, October 2008, Photo: Peter Morgan.

It is too easy, and it misses the point, to judge Kadare from a post-communist, Western viewpoint. As a writer from the unique and specific context of post-war Albania, Kadare faced existential and creative choices and decisions very different from those of his colleagues even in the other Central and Eastern European socialist

dictatorships, let alone from the vantage point of the West. Kadare's Albania faced the task of post-war modernization after half a millennium of Ottoman occupation. The Albanian regime was a partisan- and clan-based ruling caste for which Marxism-Leninism in its extreme Stalinist form performed a relatively superficial legitimizing function. And most importantly, this writer took on a mission to speak on behalf of a minor language and culture which was still only just emerging into self-identity under the most difficult of circumstances for literature, namely dictatorship. Ismail Kadare committed himself early on in his career as a writer to remaining in the land of his birth and working from within to provide an alternative voice, however muted, to that of the regime. And in fact, if we look closely at his writing of the four decades of the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha, we find an extraordinary consistency of theme and focus, beneath the Aesopian strategies of the master-story-teller.

I do not propose to try to cover this whole period in this discussion. At most I hope to suggest some of the issues at stake by looking through a few windows of Kadare's life and work in this extraordinary historical environment.

Up until 1913, Albania had been a group of provinces of the Ottoman Empire, administered by the Turks and denied even a written language. After the interregnum of the years of liberation from 1913, a northern clan leader took control of the country and in 1928 named himself the country's first King. King Zogu I married Hungarian royalty and depended on Italian support to maintain his regency. Ultimately, of course, the country became the entry point of Mussolini's imperial ambitions in the Balkans and was occupied at the outbreak of war in 1939.

Born in January 1936, Ismail Kadare grew up in privileged circumstances in the provincial Ottoman town of Gjirokastra. In his autobiographical novel, *Chronicle in Stone*, he writes:

It was a strange city, and seemed to have been cast up in the valley one winter's night like some prehistoric creature that was now clawing its way up the mountainside. Everything in the city was old and made of stone, from the streets and fountains to the roofs of the sprawling age-old houses covered with grey slates like gigantic scales.³ It was hard to

believe that under this powerful carapace the tender flesh of life survived and reproduced.⁴



Figure 2: The Fortress at Gjirokastra. Photo: Peter Morgan.

But his childhood was overshadowed by war and occupation. He was seven years old when the Germans occupied Albania, and nine at the end of the Second World War. In *Chronicle in Stone*, he gives a child's-eye account of the town and the decline into conflict and war.

Kadare belonged to the first generation of new Albanians. He was among the beneficiaries of his country's early years of post-war modernization. Like many of his generation, he had high hopes for communism during his late teens. In his memories of late adolescence, the sense of the freshness of life and the euphoria of national liberation by the communist partisans merge with the expectation of social modernization under the new regime of Enver Hoxha. For the young man the regime represented power and the possibility of change within his own lifetime. Radical modernization would create a society, liberate women, lift standards of literacy and education, open Albania up to the cosmopolitan influences of Moscow and Eastern Europe. As a member of the young intelligentsia of the fifties he identified strongly with the more or less brutal cutting of links with the past.

He was fortunate too, in coming of age just as writing was allowed to recover after the wartime upheavals and when Enver Hoxha began to nurture a new literary culture. The immediate consequence of the communist takeover for writing after November 1944 had been the annihilation of the nascent liberal public sphere of the late inter-war years and the execution or imprisonment of those writers who did not have the foresight to escape. Only in the mid-fifties, as Kadare was beginning to write, did a literary culture re-emerge.

The young man was gifted and precocious, publishing his first book of poems as a seventeen-year-old in 1953. It is important here to recognize the role of literature in communist societies – both from the point of view of the ruling regimes and for the masses of the ruled. The complexity and the sophistication of literature in this doll's-house environment is one of the most fascinating aspects of the literary sociology of Kadare's life and times.

During the late 1950s Albanian students were sent for higher education to various destinations in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Soviet aid was generous in these early years. In 1958 Kadare was sent to the famous Gorki Institute for World Literature in Moscow. Here he would learn to become a socialist writer and member of the *nomenklatura*, trained as an 'engineer of human souls' to construct the new Albania alongside economists, technologists and administrators.

At the Gorki Institute Kadare learned what it meant to be a Soviet writer. He studied the works of the European tradition, of decadent modernism and bourgeois subjectivism, and came to understand the dynamics of writing as a social and political act. Mixing with émigrés, fallen functionaries and intellectuals undergoing re-education, and observing the intricate links between politics and literature in the socialist state, the young Kadare began to draw his own conclusions.

In a spare room at the Gorki Institute dormitory he discovered a wad of pages from a novel about a doctor at the time of the Revolution. It was 1958 and the Pasternak affair was about to take place. Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in the wake of publication of *Dr. Zhivago*. This was still the period of the Khrushchev thaw, but Khrushchev needed to reassert control. He used the alibi of Western interference to initiate the first major freeze

since the introduction of his reforms. Pasternak was censured and mercilessly harassed. At the Gorki Institute and throughout the Soviet Union writers and intellectuals participated in orchestrated public denunciations of the novel and its author. Kadare would remember these experiences in his second autobiographical novel, *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*, written in 1976.⁵ Kadare watches and learns from the events that he will see repeated in Albania in respect of his own works, *The Winter of Great Solitude* and *The Palace of Dreams*. The creative intelligentsia behaves in a class fashion, manipulated from above and replicating the processes of harassment throughout their ranks. At the Gorki Institute the rhetoric and grandstanding is imitated by the students. In fact their education lies in internalizing the rituals of denunciation and auto-critique, not merely in learning the craft of socialist realism.

At the Institute Kadare encounters writers from the length and breadth of the Soviet Union, who have 'played the game' and survived the Stalinist era only to find themselves in a form of limbo. The dormitories of the Institute are a Dantean *Inferno* in which each floor-cum-circle houses a different type of Soviet writer:

First storey: students in their first year, who have not yet committed much in the way of literary sins, are accommodated here. Second storey: literary critics, conformist playwrights and people who embellish life. Third ... circle: the simplifiers, sycophants, Slavophiles. Fourth circle: women, liberals, those disillusioned with socialism. Fifth circle: slanderers and informers. Sixth circle: the de-nationalized, the ones who have abandoned their native languages and who write in Russian. (*Le Crépuscule*, 117)

The vision of a group of poets estranged from their national languages and lost in a desert of Russian, is a terrifying vision of Kadare's own future. These writers, who have abandoned their own languages in order to write in the language of Soviet Marxist-Leninist doctrine and Russian cultural hegemony, arouse Kadare's revulsion.

I found myself again in the corridor of the sixth, where the de-nationalized writers were mixed up with each other and spoke all of their dead and dying languages at once. It was a terrible nightmare. Disfigured through drink, sweating and clammy, with trails of dried tears running down from their reddened eyes, they spoke in rough voices the languages that they had abandoned, striking themselves on the bosom with their

fists, sobbing, swearing never to forget their languages, speaking them in their dreams, accusing themselves of cowardice for having left them behind, to the mercy of the mountains and the deserts, them, their mother tongues, abandoned for the martyrdom of speaking Russian. [...] 'My language has appeared to me like a ghost!' they cried out to each other, as they woke up, terrified. I shuddered. What would the ghost of a language look like? (*Le Crépuscule*, 130)

The writing moves from satiric realism to nightmarish surrealism as Kadare imagines a writer's hell in which language has dried up like water in a desert, leaving him gasping for words. In this powerful evocation of linguistic death Kadare expresses his fear of loss of identity as a writer in Albanian. In the confrontation with those writers from Eastern Europe who have sacrificed their ethno-linguistic identity, Kadare discovers the depth of his sense of Albianity. It is a Herderian expression of the existential significance of language as an individual and a national identity-marker. The Gorki Institute is a vision of what he would become were he to identify as a Soviet writer. Kadare moves among these tortured souls, but, like Dante, is not one of them himself.

If *Chronicle in Stone* documents the writer's discovery of subjective authenticity as the conduit of individual, national and ethnic identity, *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*, written approximately five years later, charts the writer's awareness of the sacrifices involved in committing himself to literature in the communist environment. A new layer is added, only implicit in the earlier novel. In *Twilight of the Steppe Gods* the young writer comes to recognize the extent to which his Albanian identity is rooted in language and culture. Hence he must return to his native land in spite of the oppressive nature of the regime there.

By late 1960 irreparable tensions had emerged between Albania's Enver Hoxha and the new post-Stalinist leader, Nikita Khrushchev. All Albanian students were recalled from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe as Albania turned its attention to Maoist China as a potential ally in world communism. But Kadare had already learned his lessons. By the time he was recalled he had been exposed to Soviet society and culture in the wake of Khrushchev's 'secret speech' of 1956. 'I knew of Stalin's crime,' he writes, 'the disillusionment of the Russians with

communism, their despair and boredom'.⁶ He had read the new wave of youth literature and ideas, and observed the operation of ideology and writing at the centre of world communism.

Kadare's narratives of his childhood and early adulthood in *Chronicle in Stone* and *Twilight of the Steppe Gods* are driven by the need to come to terms with his identity as a writer, an individual and an Albanian under the dictatorship. *Twilight of the Steppe Gods* documents Kadare's recognition of the consequences of the 1960 break, namely that the Soviet paradigm for self-realization of the socialist writer as apparatchik has ended for this Western Balkan land.

For the post-war youth of Albania, Kadare was a poet with something new to say. He came to the attention of literary circles early and was on close terms with leading editors and literary figures. His political profile was raised in 1961, shortly after his return, when Enver Hoxha intervened in a literary dispute between the war-time writers and the post-war generation, who were now coming of age. Hoxha unexpectedly took the side of the younger generation against the old guard who were critical of liberal attitudes and writing styles. His intention appears to have been not merely to disabuse his old companions of any notions they might have regarding their ongoing authority as ex-partisans. In driving a wedge between the generations, empowering the younger, 'liberal' post-war writers against the older 'conservative' Stalinists, Hoxha purchased their allegiance at a time of change and potential ideological isolation. Hoxha was not interested in the literary freedom of the younger generation and he quickly fashioned them into his new *nomenklatura*.

From this time onward Kadare had powerful enemies among



Figure 3: Ismail Kadare as a young man, around 1960. Photo authorized by Ismail Kadare.

the hard-core Stalinist left-wing of the regime as well as a powerful protector in Enver Hoxha. In siding with the 'young Turks' on literary questions at a crucial turning point, Hoxha unsettled the cultural dogmatists of the partisan generation in the lead-up to the Albanian 'cultural revolution' of the second half of the decade, and gave the younger generation of the creative intelligentsia a taste of power which would prepare them for inculcation into the upper echelons of the ruling class.

The works of the first half of the 1960s are dominated by the young writer's commitment to his homeland after the break with the Soviet Union and increasing awareness of the problems of the dictatorship: generational conflict and friction between traditional and modern lifestyles, problems of corruption and nepotism in the regime, sterility in cultural and social matters, young people 'dropping out' through frustration and boredom. Albania figures in these works as a backdrop to questions of socialist modernization, but by 1964 a change is perceptible in the representation of Albania. Ethnic identity had become a powerful sustaining force for the writer. At the same time, in the context of the regime's move towards an openly nationalistic socialism, Kadare began to experience the conflict between the regime's instrumentalized nationalism and his own now deeply-felt patriotism. Over the years this conflict would become a more or less open battle for the voice of Albania.

This battle was long and tenaciously fought. It was always a battle between politics and literature, power and the imagination, control and freedom in which the writer for almost five decades drew his prodigious energies from a powerful, Herderian, sense of national identity and from his belief in the communist regime's betrayal of its national mission.

A writer is the natural enemy of dictatorship. [...] Dictatorship and literature can only exist together as two wild beasts that have each other by the throat. Each [...] is capable of wounding the other in different ways. The writer's wounds seem horrible because they come at once. But those the writer inflicts on dictatorship are like a time bomb, and they never heal. (*Albanian Spring*, 8)

During the first decade, as Prometheus to the dictator's Zeus,

Kadare explored the possibilities of dissent, opposition and change from within. By the late 1960s, however, he realized that change was unlikely. The decade of the 1970s was the critical period. Albania did not undergo the Khrushchev reforms that paved the way for post-totalitarian socialism of the Brezhnev era. From this time onward it was increasingly the preservation of the *message* of an alternative image of Albania that would count.

The crunch came in 1970.

If Kadare believed that his earlier writing about careerism, Party corruption, and youth disaffection could bring about change, he was dramatically disabused of this hope in that year with the events surrounding his epic novel, *The Winter of Great Solitude*.

By 1970 Enver Hoxha was rumoured to be thinking of dedicating a greater part of his time to reflection and writing, with a book about his childhood already finished (*Years of Childhood*) and one about the break with the Soviet Union (*The Khrushchevites*) under way. He was sixty-two years old. He wanted to be admired in the West for the education and literary gifts which he traced back to France. 'For the first time,' Kadare writes, 'I realized that a dictatorship may be made of harder material than the dictator himself.'⁷ With his fondness for France, his experiences as a student and young man, and the dandyism which rendered him such a different phenomenon from the other Eastern European leaders, Hoxha appeared to Kadare to have a chink in his armour.

In his later reading of the situation Kadare suggests that Hoxha was at an impasse at this time. He was isolated from the Soviet Union and feeling exposed and humiliated by the Chinese after Mao Tse-tung's 'revisionist' moves, in particular the interest in rapprochement with the USA, first expressed via intermediaries in 1970, which resulted in Nixon's visit to China in February 1972.⁸ At this stage, Kadare and others in the Albanian intelligentsia still hoped that the dictator might be open to overtures from the West after the end of the Soviet relationship. He knew that Hoxha's motivating interest was his personal vanity, not the fate of Albania. Like Tito, Hoxha might be flattered by the attentions of the West if he received the right encouragement and pretext.

Kadare's planned novel was intended to suggest an option for Hoxha in the particular environment of the late 1960s, namely a change of line, even withdrawal from the day-to-day running of the country, and the opportunity to rid himself once and for all of the old Stalinist war-horses surrounding him. Literature in the dictatorship, Kadare hoped, could provide gentle but firm pressure, a brace, to allow the healthy realignment, or, to maintain the metaphor, recuperation, of the socialist regime.

Winter of Great Solitude would be based on Hoxha's world-historic role in the break with the Soviet Union. Hoxha would appear at a moment of hope between the end of the Soviet period and the withdrawal of the country into complete isolation after the failure of the Chinese connection.⁹ The fictional representation of the leader would be designed as a 'mirror' for the dictator, showing him at his best, cleansed of dictatorial traits and offered as a 'corrective mask'. *The Winter of Great Solitude* was to thereby also to be Kadare's alibi and his protection over the following decade. Literature would offer the dictator the opportunity to change. He would begin to live up to his literary image. The novel would thus provide the writer with protection. Having presented the idealized image of the dictator and become a household name, Kadare could no longer be simply dispensed with.

Before we look at the novel itself, let us consider the intellectual environment for its production. The belief in pedagogy and the possibility of correction was ubiquitous in the Marxist-Leninist regimes. It underwrote the rituals of self-criticism and the show-trials; it enabled political change and invited manipulation. There was an entrenched belief in the upper echelons of the regime, often cynically applied and misused, that everyone could be brought to recognize the right path through assiduous study of the appropriate dogmas and teachings. A Stalin or an Enver Hoxha could use the processes of self-criticism and correction to identify, break down and, if necessary, liquidate opposition. Hoxha himself learned this lesson early on, in 1948, when he was cornered by the pro-Yugoslav faction over his infraction of the Party line regarding relations with Yugoslavia. In *Winter of Great Solitude* (later retitled *The Great Winter*)

Kadare tried to manipulate this homage to the belief in change and improvement, turning the regime's strategies back on itself. Just as socialist realism aimed to provide an iconic image of the way life will be in the communist future by showing the positive and progressive workings of history in individuals and communities in the present, so Kadare hoped to encourage the dictator to view himself in terms of a positive dialectic. He tried to turn this thinking back onto the regime itself, believing that literature could act as a 'corrective mask', which, accepted by the dictator as his 'good' face, would exert an ameliorating effect:

And so, little by little as I was working on the wintery file, the idea of the corrective mask was born in me. Would it correct the traits of the tyrant, a mask like this, that he himself would put on?¹⁰

This dynamic of literature, ideology and party leadership was nothing new. It has been part and parcel of the operations of literature in the communicative environments of the absolutist and dictatorial regimes of Central and Eastern Europe since the German enlightened absolutism of the eighteenth century. In fact the *specula principum*, *Fürstenspiegel* or 'mirror for princes' had been an important form of political literature extending back well into the medieval period, and exemplified in works such as Erasmus' *Education of a Christian Prince* (1516) and François Fénelon's *Télémaque* (1699), written in order to educate and instill a sense of duty into the future king of France, Louis XV.

Kadare gained access to the documentation of the meetings of Hoxha, Mehmet Shehu and the other members of the Albanian delegation with Khrushchev and the Soviet leadership at the meeting of eighty-one world communist leaders in Moscow in 1960. The omnipresent Nexhmije Hoxha, spouse of Enver, ex-partisan guerrilla and Director of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism, supported and facilitated his request, opening the secret archive to him. Her reasons for doing so are conjectural but interesting. Nexhmije was a hard-line Stalinist devoted to maintaining the stability of the regime, her own and Enver's position. She was wily enough to recognize in Kadare potentially a valuable ally as well as a dangerous enemy by

1970 when his reputation had reached France (and probably before). Perhaps Nexhmije saw in this novel the means of making or breaking Albania's only alternative voice to the regime. If Kadare were given the freedom to make irreparable mistakes in this novel about Hoxha and the break with the Soviet Union, he would be discredited for life, particularly with Enver, who had protected him in the past. If he succeeded in writing a novel acceptable to the regime, he would become unattractive to his supporters in the West. For Nexhmije, who saw the world in black-and-white, the possibility of Kadare's stepping the fine line between these two extremes was unlikely.

In 1971 Nexhmije invited Kadare to discuss the novel with her. It was at this time that the writer's only private meeting with the dictator took place. During the meeting with Nexhmije, Enver walked into the room 'by chance' and chatted with Kadare for several hours about literature and their common origins in Gjirokastra.

Kadare wrote quickly as usual, substantially finishing the manuscript of *The Winter of Great Solitude* by the end of 1971. Everything in the novel was true, writes Kadare, except the portrait of the dictator.



Figure 4: Meeting of Ismail Kadare and Enver Hoxha, with Hoxha's daughter Pranvera, c.1970. Photo authorized by Ismail Kadare.

From a certain point of view it was exact: the words, the gestures, the conversations all belonged to the character. But it was incomplete. It lacked the blemishes and the shadows, not to mention the key to everything in his character, the true force behind that brazen insanity. (*Le Poids*, 348)

The story is set in the winter months between September 1960 and March 1961, the time of the break between Moscow and Tirana. Journalist and translator, Besnik Struga, is chosen to accompany the Albanian delegation to Moscow for the summit meeting of the eighty-one heads of international communist organizations in November 1960. However Besnik's involvement in the Moscow conference sets up a chain of events in his private life which result in the destruction of his marriage and of his career.

Kadare paints a broad canvas of secondary figures. Besnik's father Kristaq is an ex-partisan and hero of the Albanian communist movement, famous for having blown up the tomb of the Queen Mother during the resistance. His younger brother, Beni, is typical of Kadare's disaffected youth in the early novel, *The City without Signs*. Beni drinks too much, spends his time hanging around with his friends, listens to popular music and grows his hair long. Constantly reminded of the achievements of his father's generation, he lacks self-esteem and a sense of direction, but is rehabilitated in the novel after discovering fulfilment through work and self-sacrifice in the communist cause.

Besnik, alone after the breakdown of his private life, seeks a sense of inclusion through the recognition that he too, even in his minor role, contributed to the independence of Albania, and, in an oceanic moment recognizes his place in the communist scheme of things. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, the outlook is bleak. Besnik's emotional life is in tatters, the country is still suffering from a bitterly cold winter, despite the late stage of the year and the final image is of people struggling against snowstorms to repair television and radio antennas which will no longer receive news or information from the outside world. The West is out of bounds, and even the Warsaw Pact countries are now blockaded. Only relations with China are strengthening. The novel ends with the death of the old and the birth of the new on a cold day at the end of winter 1961. On the surface

of things, Besnik achieves a sense of personal resolution at the end through his conviction that he has in his own way contributed to Albania's maintenance of her national integrity, despite the losses in his private life. And yet this novel of the simple soldier of communism ends in loss. The theme of the sacrifice of the personal for the public could not be clearer – nor any more questionable in Besnik's thoughts, despite the epic-heroic tenor of the writing.

While Kadare can be seen to have fashioned Enver Hoxha into a hero of Albanian socialism and to have painted a broad epic canvas of the events of 1961, the novel ends on an ambivalent note. Hoxha's 'heroic' actions have affected the country in disastrous ways from the highest echelons of politics right down to the most intimate levels of interpersonal relations.

Winter of Great Solitude is a flawed work, and it has been widely criticized for pandering to the image of the dictator as a man of ideological conviction, inner strength and international importance when in fact his involvement was self-seeking, ideologically devious and determined by the conflict between the two communist superpowers, China and the Soviet Union. The strategy of creating an alibi for his writing by offering the dictator an idealized image which would function as the model of the 'good dictator' was a risky move. Politically astute, even cunning as he was, Kadare was no match for Hoxha.

The rumour of the book's existence polarized the two main factions around Hoxha: the old-guard Stalinists, whose power base lay in the *Sigurimi*, the secret police, and the liberals, headed by Ramiz Alia, but held in contempt by powerful figures, in particular Nexhmije. The manuscript was passed back and forth among the factions, each sizing it up for their political purposes for or against the author, given the extremely touchy subject of the supreme leader himself. Enver Hoxha withdrew into ominous silence. The novel was neither hailed nor prohibited, but lay in check between the dictator and the factions around him.

Time was passing, the West showed no interest in rapprochement, and the dictator had to make a move. At a meeting of the Central Committee he drew attention to ideological deviations and announced

the existence of a conspiracy close to the heart of government. As ever, he would divide and rule, and internal political intrigue would be used to justify increased vigilance and control.

The manuscript was authorized for publication and sent to the printer. It appeared in January 1973 in a print run of twenty-five thousand copies, which was soon sold out.¹¹ On its appearance, Kadri Hazbiu, Minister for the Interior declared, 'I read forty pages of it and I spat forty times'.¹² Each side thought that it had won, and hoped to see Kadare's scalp held aloft as a tribute to liberalism or to orthodoxy.

The crackdown occurred in early 1973. A press campaign was launched against the novel, accusing its author of anti-socialist activity and hostility towards the dictatorship of the proletariat and the class struggle. Not surprisingly, the use of the word 'solitude' in the original title, with its suggestion of criticism of the Supreme Leader was controversial. The newspapers were flooded with letters of denunciation (an important demonstration of popular outrage) and meetings were convened to discuss the work; all of this in the context of general terror amidst the discovery of a broader plot against the government, in which conspirators were identified, imprisoned and executed. Kadare suspected at the time that Nexhmije was the primary mover behind the campaign to use the novel against him, linking him to the wider conspiracy, and gives substance to his accusations in the light of revelations which came about after 1991.¹³

Hoxha himself remained quiet, proof at the time for Kadare that he was tempted by the possibilities of self-representation and change implicit in the representation of him in the novel. However he was in a difficult situation, with Nexhmije, the *Sigurimi* and the old-guard 'left-wing' pressing for retaliation against the writer and his supporters, the Soviets watching with interest (he assumes), and the liberals hoping for change. Hoxha knew that he would not find a writer to match Kadare, who now, since 1970, had a following in France. If the novel were banned, his flattering image as the hero of Albanian independence and nemesis of the Soviet revisionists would have to disappear from view. The Soviets would rejoice and the left wing of the Party would appear victorious. If the novel were allowed to remain in circulation, he would remain in debt to this writer who

was nevertheless challenging him both through his representation of an Albania alone and impoverished in the post-war world, and as the spokesman for Albania in France and the wider world.

The situation became prolonged, but finally Kadare's enemies appeared to have won. On 25 October, 1975 Kadare was obliged to submit a self-criticism before a committee of the Party held in the offices of the Union of Writers. The author admitted to having written and submitted for publication a work 'hostile, anti-revolutionary, directed against the Party line, against the regime, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the people'.¹⁴ However the punishment turned out to be light. The writer was banished from Tirana in order to 'reflect on the ways in which he might make good his errors' in rural central Albania.¹⁵ Nevertheless the message was clear: he must change the way he wrote. But to do so would mean to become a different writer, to cease being Ismail Kadare. The plan to educate the dictator had backfired badly.

The humiliation of Kadare, the punishment of being sent to the country to work alongside the people, and the nominal prohibition of any further novels were mild in comparison to the penalties meted out to others for less provocation. However Hoxha made his point. Kadare had overstepped the limits and was put on notice. The trial of 1975 would be repeated in a more threatening environment in 1982 as a result of the publication of *The Palace of Dreams*. It represented a significant heightening of the stakes in the cat-and-mouse game which lasted from 1975 until the dictator's death in 1985.

For Hoxha the maintenance of political insecurity among those beneath him was paramount. The novel remained, a flattering testament to his leadership. Hated by the old guard as well as by his colleagues in the Union of Writers and Artists, Kadare had the protection of the leader, who knew well that the writer was of greater value to him alive rather than dead. By now, too, Kadare had influential friends and was known in France. He could no longer simply disappear. From now on Kadare had to watch his every move. He was a marked man.

In retrospect Kadare is defensive of his decision to write *The Great Winter*. In fact he continued to write clandestinely and obliquely about

political themes, but he never again engaged the dictator directly as he had in that work.

The deep ambivalence in Kadare's early writing about the dictator lent depth to the images of the tyrant in Kadare's work, and fuelled the suspicions of his detractors that he was sympathetic to, and a participant in, Albanian communism. But Kadare was not sympathetic to the real Hoxha or to communism as an ideal or an ideology, although he certainly welcomed aspects of the modernization of his country. During the 1960s he could still see in Hoxha a figure of national significance, as a particularly Albanian type of leader and patriot. As a result partly of his experiences in writing *The Great Winter*, he would recognize the narcissistic psychopath, and came to regard Hoxha with the abhorrence that comes of intimacy as he competed with him for the voice of Albania.

For the Western left, Kadare's greatest fault was his failure to speak out against the regime. They wanted a Solzhenitsyn, or a Havel, a heroic dissident in the post-totalitarian mould. However it was impossible to be a dissident in the post-1968 mode in Albania. Hoxha's dictatorship was Stalinist to the last and all signs of opposition or dissent were dealt with ruthlessly. Opposition could only exist outside the country.

Ismail Kadare chose to compromise in order to continue living and writing in Albania, without adopting the suicidal role of the heroic outsider on the one hand, and without supporting the dictatorship on the other. His was not the heroic dissidence of the GDR dissident Jürgen Fuchs, for example, which expressed itself in dogged refusal to be bowed by the mechanisms of intimidation, and which resulted in imprisonment and physical and psychological injury and death. However it is a form of bearing witness, of refusal to be silenced, and of the maintenance, from within, of belief in the possibility of an alternative to the megalomania of the dictatorship. In *The Temptations of Unfreedom*, the social theorist Ralf Dahrendorf re-functioned the term 'Erasmian' to describe intellectuals such as Kadare who chose a form of compromise in order to continue to bear witness to their historical environments.¹⁶ Ismail Kadare never referred to himself as a dissident. However his literary praxis was a form of opposition

in as much as he steadfastly refused to surrender his language and identity or to be forced into exile. He expressed defiance through the representation of the impossibility of everyday life under communism and through the evocation of an 'eternal Albania' which was more ancient, more durable and more decent than the new Albania of Enver Hoxha. However he also paid dearly in personal terms for his refusal to succumb to the dictatorship. In his late work, *The Shadow*, he appears embittered and obsessed, a remnant of an early talent deformed by the spirit of refusal. And in the final pages of his post-communist autobiography, *The Weight of the Cross*, he looks back over a body of work deeply damaged by its environment. Like all art born amidst violence, he writes, his work suffered the 'deficiencies, mutilations and defigurations' of the epoch. Nevertheless, the refusal to participate in the rosy lies of socialism, which hid a deep hatred of humanity, was enough to render his works a 'funeral lament' amidst the sterile festivities of socialism. That, he writes, was his 'greatest defiance'.¹⁷

Notes

- 1 Bernard Rapp, *Caractères: Engagement* (= *Caractères* no. 25), Interview with Ismail Kadare (*Printemps albanais*), Marie Gautheron (*L'Honneur*), Gilles Plazy, (editor/biographer of Vercors), Bernhard-Henri Lévy (*Les Aventures de la liberté*), *Antenne 2*, 1991.
- 2 Noel Malcolm, 'In the Palace of Nightmares', review of *The Three-Arched Bridge*, *The New York Review of Books* 44.17 (November 1997): 21–24 (p. 23).
- 3 Ismail Kadare, *Chronicle in Stone*, trans. from the Albanian, New York, 1987, p. 11. The unnamed translator was the émigré Albanian philologist, Arshi Pipa. All further English references will be indicated in brackets after the text. In places where Pipa's translation lacks accuracy I have adopted the corrections of David Bellos in Ismail Kadare, *Chronicle in Stone*, Edinburgh, 2007, marked with an asterisk (*).
- 4 Ismail Kadare, *Chronicle in Stone*, trans. from the Albanian, New York, 1987, p. 11.
- 5 Ismail Kadaré, *Le Crépuscule des dieux de la steppe*, trans. Jusuf Vrioni, Paris, 1996; the following translations are my own.
- 6 Ismail Kadare, *Albanian Spring: The Anatomy of a Tyranny*, trans. Émile Capouya, London, 1995, p. 154.

- 7 Ismail Kadaré, *Dialogue avec Alain Bosquet*, trans. Jusuf Vrioni, Paris, 1995, p. 45.
- 8 In November 1970 Mao sent his first invitation indirectly through the Romanians who had good relations with both China and the USA; after much diplomatic activity, including a secret visit by Henry Kissinger in July 1971, the meeting between Mao and Nixon took place in February 1972. See Jung Chang, and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, London, 2006, pp. 703–09.
- 9 Kadaré, *Dialogue avec Alain Bosquet*, pp. 44–45.
- 10 Ismail Kadare, *Invitation à l'atelier de l'écrivain*, suivi de *Le poids de la croix*, trans. Jusuf Vrioni, Paris, 1991, p. 337. My translation.
- 11 Kadaré and Fernandez-Récatola, *Temps barbares*, p. 80. According to Kadare the average first print run in Albania was 30,000 copies, after which additional printings would reach 60–100,000 copies. Hence, he claims, his work was well known throughout Albania under the dictatorship. Cf. Kadaré/Faye, *Entretiens*, p. 79; Paul de Sinety, 'Entretien avec Claude Durand', *L'Oeil de boeuf* 20 (May 2000): 29–34 (p. 33).
- 12 Kadaré, *Le Poids*, p. 365.
- 13 Kadaré, *Le Poids*, pp. 553–54.
- 14 Sinani, Shaban, ed., *Le Dossier Kadaré*, trans. Tedi Papavrami, Paris, 2006, p. 92.
- 15 Kadaré, *Le Poids*, p. 382.
- 16 Ralf Dahrendorf, *Versuchungen der Unfreiheit: Die Intellektuellen in Zeiten der Prüfung*, München, 2006, p. 112 and passim.
- 17 Kadaré, *Le Poids*, p. 541.