

**ISMAIL KADARE, ECRIVAIN, PRESENTATION OF HIS BOOKS.
Tuesday 31th October 2006**



REPORT

A Discussion with Ismail Kadaré

The world famous Albanian writer Ismail Kadaré came to present his work in Oxford, at the invitation of the Maison Française d'Oxford and the Oxford University Albanian Society. The conference took the format of a conversation between Noel Malcolm, Professor at All Souls College, and Ismail Kadaré, who was speaking in French and being simultaneously translated into English by David Bellos, Professor at Princeton University and a leading expert on Kadaré. The interview was followed by a debate between Kadaré and the audience, who came in large numbers and were very keen to engage in a discussion with the writer.

Childhood and the Communist reality

Noel Malcolm first asked Kadaré about his experience as a child in Communist Albania, as Kadaré lived through the establishment of the Communist regime. The writer explained that he knew nothing about it at the age of five and only became aware of it much later. Communism then represented the only concrete reality. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was his first introduction to freedom, but if he preferred *MacBeth*'s ghosts over the reality of Communism, that was simply because such ghosts sounded much more interesting to him at the time. It was his trust in and love of literature that saved him and later constituted a real way out for him.

Kadaré was then led to consider how the stories that he inherited from older generations in his family contrasted with the official Communist world. Ottoman culture did not exist, he said. He described it in *Chronicle in Stone* (1971) only to make fun of it. In his home town, there were a lot of former officials of the Ottoman Empire, who had retired to Albania and appeared to him as quixotic characters. They were first and foremost very productive figures for children's imagination and great material for literature.

The “negative school” of Socialist Realism

Kadaré was a student at the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow. Noel Malcolm wondered how heavy a burden the doctrine of Socialist Realism was on his work, as he noted that, for instance, there is not a single happy collective farmer in one of his earliest novels, *The General of the Dead Army* (1963). Kadaré defined the Institute as a “negative school”, which was paradoxically useful since he systematically took the opposite stance on what his professors advocated. The first principle of socialist literature being that it should be positive, unlike decadent Western literature, the young writer decided to do the reverse. That is precisely why mud, corpses and rain can be found in his books. When he first came to the West in 1970 and was interviewed about *The General of the Dead Army*, he was made to account for the salient presence of rain on the first and last pages of the novel. To this “fearful question” he responded that it did rain in Albania. In fact, including rain in his novel was nothing less than a literary challenge to the orthodoxy of Albanian literature.

Censorship issues

The discussion then moved to the issue of censorship. Noel Malcolm asked Ismaïl Kadaré when he became aware of the ways in which the regime controlled literary production and banned famous Albanian poets from being published. Kadaré dated this back to when he was a student in Tirana (he went to university in 1954), adding that everybody was expecting Stalin's crimes to be denounced at that time.

Ismaïl Kadaré then concentrated on an anecdote connected with the preface of his first collection of poems, which was then of great importance to him. Noel Malcolm recalled that the preface blamed the book for suffering from the touches of Western decadence. Kadaré explained how his Russian editor, David Samoïlov, urged him to abandon his publication and warned him that the publishing house had asked him to mention Western decadence in the preface. Despite his warnings, Kadaré wanted it to be published at all costs. He identified this criticism as a lesser evil and even a crucial innovation, given that the accusation of Western decadence eventually allowed the work to be published.

Noel Malcolm drew attention to the work of Shaban Sinani, *Le Dossier Kadaré* (2006), which brought documents out of the State archives, including criticisms of Kadaré's work at an official level. Stressing the fact that quasi-official accusations cropped up after the publication of *The Palace of Dreams* (1981), Malcolm asked how it was possible for a book with an anti-totalitarian message to escape censorship. The clear answer to this was that there was no official censorship, said Kadaré. The Russian organisation called *Glavlit* simply did not exist in Albania. Though he still found this very mysterious, Kadaré gave two reasons for this—first, the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha thought he had control over everything, and secondly, he was keen to be well considered by France, as he studied in France and mixed in literary circles (Kadaré calls this his “gift from France”). *The Palace of Dreams* was thus banned two weeks after its publication, but all its copies were already sold. According to the writer, it was the novel which had the strongest impact on the country, as people read it knowing that it had been banned and were therefore trying to detect why it was censored.

The only novel to have been censored before its publication was *The Concert at the End of the Winter* (1988), which was read by a spy beforehand and subsequently forbidden from being even mentioned. As the book dealt with the assassination of Mao Zetong's successor, it was suspected of being linked with the death of Mehmet Shehu, Albania's own Number Two, three weeks after the book was handed in.

Literature and politics: literary topics first

Kadaré knew he was criticized for disregarding the present and promoting literature over political ideas. As a result, he wrote *The Great Winter* (1977), his most political book. Another of his political novels, *The Wedding* (1968), led him to think he was “finished as a writer”, as he had yielded into writing about happy topics praised by the official critics. After that he decided to write both a highly political and dramatic novel based on a taboo subject, the breaking off of relations between Albania and the Socialist camp. He explained how he was allowed to see the secret files of the conversations that took place between the two sides in Moscow. He copied them all and finally described the eighty party heads as eighty gangsters, except for Enver Hoxha, the Albanian dictator whom he portrayed as both hypocritical and clever.

Ismaïl Kadaré asserted throughout the discussion that his writing was however primarily driven by literary and not purely political concerns. He thus stated that it was not freedom that took him towards literature, but literature that took him towards freedom. Noel Malcolm suggested that his reference to earlier historical periods provided him with literary resources and they were therefore not merely to be viewed as a strategic, coded ways of dealing with the present. Kadaré fully agreed with this interpretation. His works do not stem from political allusion, he said, they begin with a good literary topic.

Questions from the floor

David Bellos launched the discussion by asking Ismaïl Kadaré how he knew for sure when his novels were finished, as he kept rewriting and expanding them. Kadaré asserted the right for an author to be the master of his work and rejected the assumption that he could have altered his texts to make their political connotations more suitable. He challenged such “lies” by stressing the fact that all versions of *Chronicle in Stone* appeared under the Communist regime and what he called his “worst novel”, *The Wedding*, could still easily be found in its original edition. David Bellos was also invited to comment on his work as a translator, as Kadaré’s novels are first translated from Albanian into French by Tedi Papavrami, and then from French into English.

Ismaïl Kadaré subsequently answered a series of questions from the floor. He often positioned himself against the premises of the various questions he was asked. He thus stated that he had never taken Western democracies for an ideal world but deemed their problems, while being fully aware of them, as mere trifles compared with the situation of a dictatorship. When asked about the condition of the foreigner (which he experienced in Russia as a student and is still confronted with now that he spends a lot of his time in France), he emphasised that no serious writer could feel divided in a global world. Someone picked up on one of his previous answers and asked him whether he seriously meant that he would have written the same novels if he had not lived under a dictatorship. Kadaré vigorously replied that literature had nothing to do with political regime. The history of literature would be all too simple if one could tell mediocre works from great works, by simply relating them to their political contexts.

The difficulty of writing about Albania today was ultimately raised. Someone observed that Albania was now a free, but somewhat ordinary, corrupt Eastern European country. Kadaré had no nostalgia for the so-called exotic crimes of the past. For him it was crucial to realise that great writers do not have to be persecuted in order to be great writers, and that historical misfortunes are in no way related to literature, since, as he put it, “literature is eternal.”