

The Albanian novelist is the winner 2018 edition of the Nonino. Tomorrow in the bookstores there will be his «*The Provocation*» (La Nave di Teseo)

Nightmares and enticements of the regime in Kadare's tragic world.

A bard of the grotesque, he excels in the stories of lives strangled by Evil.

By Claudio Magris

The Balkans says a famous sentence by Churchill, produce more History than they can consume. This History discharged by the production-consumption circuit, as pieces fallen from the assembly lines that carry goods, ends up overflowing like a flooding river, overwhelming and submerging embankments and borders, household and debris that block the passage. Unsolved History is often the incubation and soon the outbreak of a war.

The Balkans are a hotbed of wars, even recent ones, never completely extinguished. Like so many names of geopolitical realities — according to Metternich, Italy was only a geographic expression — even "Balkans" is a word about which little is not known and sometimes nobody wants to know what realities it precisely indicates. Croatia, for example, strictly speaking maybe would not be part of it geographically, but the Pannonia of the great Croatian writer Krleža is a mighty poetic universe in which the clouds of south-eastern Europe pass.

Non-consumed history or not set in a steady and ordered political-social system and in its institutions is a changeable and stormy fluctuation of individual and collective destinies, of existences entrusted to the uncertainty and hazard, of lives like leaves in a storm. Perhaps this is also the reason why the Balkans have created and continue to create a very lively literature, masterpieces spread evenly in different countries and different languages — although not always as different as they claim; My *Danube*, translated thirty years ago into Serbo-Croatian, today has a Croatian version and a Serbian version, both excellent. Often, from chaos a devastated politics and a great literature can be born — in the Balkans, to make just a few examples, Crnjanski, Andric, Kiš, Krleža and others that would have the same right to be mentioned. May literature and art in general be bound to grow well when things are not going well?

One of these impressive creators is Ismail Kadare. His Albania is — linguistically, culturally and historically — a peculiar diversity also within the Balkan kaleidoscope. Albanian is an Illyrian language that has nothing to do with the Slavic languages, which influence but only in part one of its two great dialects. The country was for centuries under the Ottoman Empire and Islamization, as Kadare himself underlines, placed it, in the western imaginary, in a sometimes negative contraposition to the Slavic,

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Christian-Orthodox world. Like many writers of those countries, Kadare, born in an Islamic family but respectfully unrelated to any specific religion, strongly feels the fascination of the presence of the Ottoman culture, of its often cruel but politically prudent power, of its sense of the vanity and inevitability of all things, of its impetus and its negligent tiredness. Kadare knows he owes mainly to the conflicting Slavic-Ottoman world «The original global vision, great stories, epic and misfortunes» of Balkan literature, as he himself declared, without being able to say whether this is good or unfortunate.

Kadare, moreover, has also transfused into his narrative the indomitable, centuries-old Albanian resistance to the Ottoman rule, as in his novel, *The Drums of Rain* (1981) that resumes the ancient and perennial epic theme of the siege and celebrates the exploits and the victory of the Albanian national hero, Skanderbeg, the champion of the struggle against the Turks.

Wars and slavery have invested Albania not only in distant times. Nazism and fascism placed and imposed, to our misfortune, the crown of Albania on the head of Victory Emmanuel III. About that episode Kadare wrote a splendid novel, *The General of the Dead Army* (1963), the misty search for the bodies of the Italian soldiers, stories of ghosts but even more of men, of yesterday and today. Kadare's poetic force is in his black and white writing more than in the fanciful Oriental one, in his coldness that highlights even more the tragic historical and human vicissitude and the tragic colors of the war.

In the bloody war for the liberation of the Balkans Kadare saw and represented the Nazi terror already in his hometown, Gjirokastër, the «Stone City » of his homonymous novel, and saw and witnessed the red terror that would establish in the Albania freed from Nazi-fascism the most ferocious, tyrannical and inept of communist regimes; Hoxha's ruthless dictatorship. The ideological extremism of the regime would lead Albania to break its relations even with Khrushchev's Soviet Union, considered too moderate, and even with Maoist China, in those years also in bad terms with the USSR rejected as a traitor of world's revolution at any rate but evidently not enough extremist for the Albanian regime. Today Albania is a free, lively country, open to other cultures and in particular to the Italian one; there are new important writers, scholars — for example, Viola Adhami — of that science of translating that is an opening to the world, young researchers of Italian studies as Mimosa Hysa.

Kadare lived in an isolated country, in a cruel and incompetent dictatorship; in a system, John Banville has written, in the Alice in Wonderland's style («I'll be the judge and the jury, I'll bring the entire suit and condemn you to death", it is said in Carroll's grotesque fairy). The experience, the difficulties, the flatteries, the nightmares and the triumphant disasters of the dictatorship were probably a fundamental and inevitably ambiguous experience for Kadare. He was a member of the Albanian Parliament from 1970 to 1982, threatened with death and also celebrated by the regime, proud, in his nationalism, of having a great writer, crowned by worldwide success. Experiences that who has not lived in such a regime cannot even truly imagine and even less judge. Kadare abandoned

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Albania in 1990, when the dictatorship was dying or was almost dead and when, it is said, the disappointment for the democracy born from the ashes of that totalitarianism seems to have been for him not so much less strong than the horror now bravely shown now necessarily nuanced for totalitarianism.

A kind of totalitarianism that seems to be, in the twentieth century, a horrible but fruitful source of great literature. In the wonderful *The Palace of Dreams* (1980) by Kadare, totalitarianism tries to seize even the unconscious, the fantasies and the nightmares of its slaves, transformed each into an informer. The experience of the dictatorship must have imprinted in Kadare the meaning of life also as inevitable ambiguity and treason. Maybe this is the reason why Kadare rejects the alternative, in the role of a writer, between dissidence and non-dissidence, which probably appears to him nobly abstract and illusory. Unlike many noble and brave dissidents, Kadare seems to have experienced totalitarianism even from inside, as a deadly disease (falsification, falsehood, repression) that somehow contaminates those who suffer that world. The grotesque, playing with the false, the key element of his tales, are everybody's truth, of the tyrants as well as of the victims and the writers themselves. Evil, in *The eye of the Tyrant* (1991) blinds even the victims; who writes, masterfully, about divided personalities cannot fail to know also duplicity in himself. After all, every writer is also a spy, not of a regime but of life. The world portrayed by Kadare has been compared to that of Orwell's 1984. The analogy is obvious, but with a difference: that world remains external, somehow, to Orwell, who is not part of it, though deeply feeling its horrible presence, whereas Kadare is a little as if he had actually lived under the gaze of the Big Brother.

A prolific author of many works that cannot be listed all and a powerful poet of the grotesque and the fantastic, Kadare reaches perhaps its truest grandeur not only evoking empires and tyrannies, but narrating simple and deep stories as life itself — for example in *The Provocation* (2012), a short, terse and memorable tale of war in which between two adverse positions facing each other with sporadic cannon strokes passes the litter of a wounded woman again and again from one to the other part, in a dull sequence of trenches lighted by wandering reflections of warm humanity. The foolishness and inconceivability of the war, where however, between events of little matter, and in a dismissed Kafkaesque essentiality, takes place the unaware human maturation of Corporal Fred Kosturi, one of the great «simple hearts» of literature.

He feels the charm of eastern tradition but his poetic force is in his cold, black and white writing

The tale

Novelist, poet and essayist, Ismail Kadare is the winner of the Nonino Prize 2018

Kadare, 81, was born in Gjirokastër, in the south of Albania. After his debut as a poet, he made his first appearance in the field of the novel in 1963 with *The General of the Dead Army*. In 1990 he obtained political asylum in France. Today he lives between Paris and Tirana.

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Tomorrow his war tale *The Provocation* will be in the bookstores, published by La Nave di Teseo, the publishing house that has recently purchased the rights for the translation both of his latest work and of the Albanian writer's complete catalogue.