

Besnik Mustafaj
A summer of no return
[*Un été sans retour*].
Christiane Montécot, transl.
Arles. Actes Sud. 1992. 201 pages

For decades, Albanians used their novels more for propping up furniture and potted plants than for reading and entertainment. Not until the appearance of the novels of Ismail Kadare did readers, with socialist realism coming out of their ears, begin to take a genuine interest in their own literature. Students in the dorms, even factory workers, remember spending nights on end wide awake, lapping up Kadare's books and passing them on to their impatient friends as quickly as possible. They were like a breath of fresh air.

It was not only the readers who took note of the new stylistic devices used by the literary 'prince of the nation' in his better novels of early years, *The general of the dead army*, *Chronicle in stone*, and *Broken April*, but also a whole generation of up and coming young writers who suddenly realized that you did not have to be French, English, Italian or Russian to write a good book.

Besnik Mustafaj is one of the leading proponents of this post-Kadare generation of prose writers. His *Un été sans retour*, a shorter novel in thirteen chapters, was begun in 1985 and originally published, together with various short stories, in Tiranë in 1989 under the title *Vera pakthim* (Summer of no return). Translated into French by Christiane Montécot, it is the first non-Kadare Albanian novel of the last decade to have become accessible to the Western public. The plot seems simple enough. Gori's sudden return to his wife Sana after long years of absence and their equally abrupt departure for holidays on the coast mark the beginning of a slow and insidious process of estrangement between the two. Gori, we later discover, has returned from the Nazi concentration camp of Mauthausen, an appellative no doubt re-interpreted by most Albanian readers as Spaç, Burrel or Qafë-Bari of the communist regime. Discreetly woven into the plot is the Albanian and Balkan legend of little Constantine, which was already utilized, though more directly, by Ismail Kadare in his 1979 novel *Doruntine*.

Born in the wild mountainous region of Tropojë in northern Albania on 4 September 1958, Besnik Mustafaj became a prominent figure in Albania's painful struggle out of four decades of Stalinist dictatorship and has played a role in the democratic renewal of his country, a renewal which will hopefully soon be matched by a cultural renaissance out of years of literary lethargy. At an Albanian cultural festival held in Brussels in early December 1991, the writer noted aptly that it is only when you leave and re-enter a room which you have been in for a long time that you realize how stale the air is. Indeed some descriptive passages of the present novel seem longish and vapid, a lingering reflection no doubt of the stale air and moral values of the period in which they were written.

It is a rather sad commentary on the state of Albanian literature that no contemporary Albanian writer up to now has been able to match Ismail Kadare on the domestic market or in international renown. Besnik Mustafaj nonetheless offers promise that things are beginning to change and it is to be hoped that more talented young writers of the post-Kadare generation, like him, will soon find their place in Western bookstores.

Also by the same publisher is a collection of Mustafaj's political essays entitled *Entre crimes et mirages. Albanie*, Arles 1992 (Albania, between crimes and mirages). After four decades of forced silence, the Albanians have much to tell us.

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