

Title: The Decadent Muse in Ismail Kadare's "The Albanian Writers' Union as Mirrored by a Woman"

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In 2005, the well-known Albanian writer Ismail Kadare published a short story in *The New Yorker* titled "The Albanian Writers' Union as Mirrored by a Woman." The provocative title refers to both Kadare's experiences as a writer in communist Albania and to a prostitute by the name of Marguerite. According to the narrator, Marguerite lived across the street from the Albanian Writers' Union and powerfully enticed his imagination. As far as the intention of the story goes, Kadare announces in the very last sentence that this story is a "belated tribute" for Marguerite. Yet, this belated tribute, though on one level elegiac and directed at a specific person, also seems relevant on another, more symbolic level. While Kadare's narrative voice emerges as shockingly personal in this story, there is an inbred multiplicity of meanings in his candid references to his sexual desires and his longing for the "body of Marguerite." However earnest, this tribute is ultimately directed not only at Marguerite the person, but also at the writer under communism, the challenges that the totalitarian spiritual landscape presented to him, as well as his ultimate aesthetic transcendence.

For the author, the story of Marguerite and the history of the Albanian Writers' Union are "bound together like a fragrance to an almost forgotten memory." The quasi-symbiosis engineered in the author's imagination discloses an inability to simply outline the history of the Union. Rather, the author writes a story that is made up of two narrative lines, one official and shaped by official history, and the other decadent and personal. This dual nature of the narrative is merely the result of the author's dual existence, by day a member of the Writers' Union, and by night a dreamer and aspiring sexual deviant. To simply relate the history of the Union would designate that space and that reality as the world that the author inhabits. Yet to tell a dual story means to lead a dual life. As I argue in this paper, in this duality, this detachment from official history into an erotic fantasy, we find Kadare's own creative signature as an author in Enver Hoxha's totalitarian regime in Albania. Spiritual retreat, spiritual dissidence if not open and revolutionary dissidence, is perhaps the most important connecting thread among all Kadarean narratives. In this story, Kadare reveals the mechanics of that retreat and writes a belated tribute to that retreat.

Works Cited

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