

Book Review: Three Albanian Short Stories from Writing from the Empire behind the Wall, Edited by Michael March

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Allegory and inference: The Soviet legacy in Albanian literature: Ismail Kadare, "The concert"; Mimoza Ahmeti, "The secret of my youth"; Teodor Laço, "The pain of a distant writer"

These three short stories from an anthology of many previously untranslated works by authors from "the empire behind the wall", a term used by the Czech author Ivan Klima whose introduction explains the bitter-sweet atmosphere of Soviet censorship which overshadowed writers of the Soviet period and still continues to affect writers of the former Eastern block even today.

Klima was one of the writers in the Stalin years familiar with the terror of interrogation and charges of anti-statism. Even long after Stalin's death, when the threat of execution was no longer so terrifying a force, many writers knew their works were condemned to remain forever unpublished in their own countries. And so some relinquished the truth for that version of it requested by the state and accepted "the falsifying of history" (Klima, xxii), while others were forced to leave their countries and live in self-imposed exile. Those who stayed saw "the awarding of privileges to the capable while the able and talented were rejected (Klima xxii). But for still other writers the challenge created by the imposition of laws of state propaganda became a creative force, through which they learned to disguise political critique within literature either in ironic, sardonic or allegorical form. In Klima's words "I have often thought that what the empire deprived us of in freedom, it returned to us in the form of experience ... deep experiences do not make a great writer, but I am convinced that great literature seldom arises without it" (xxiv).

And so that legacy continued in Eastern Europe, beyond the crumbling of the Empire, and that literature still contains the creative imagery and multi-textual allegorical references from which the unwritten meaning can be inferred gradually by peeling away the text layer by layer. This is a rich literary tradition with those subtle subtextual references so familiar to readers of

works written under the Soviet regime. As though testament to a terrifying past in which speaking the truth could get you killed, often the message is left unwritten, for the reader to infer. These three Albanian pieces complement each other in that they contain the full spectrum of that Soviet literary legacy, from the subtextual inferences of "pain of a distant writer" to the bafflingly allegorical "the secret of my youth" to the mockingly ironic "the concert".

In "The concert", Kadare ridicules Communist propagandization of the arts. Set in Maoist China, this is an "anti-love story" with the explicit suggestion that Albania be chosen as the model country in which to begin the total elimination of love from society. The idea is proposed by Mao's wife who blames the onset of old age for the loss of love in the aging couple's relationship. Unable to face this as a personal problem, she decides to inflict the same suffering on society by instigating the liquidation of love in society and chooses Albania as the ideal place to begin. The story opens with Mao taking great delight in reading letters from writers deported to the "water and mud" for "re-education", thanking him for "delivering us from the demon of writing" (257). Having successfully brought about liquidation of the arts, Kadare's Mao is keen for the total control of society. In keeping with his political views, Mao's wife's plan to abolish love also provides an excuse for his growing hatred of her. The irony of the ridiculous suggestion to implement a plan to liquidate love is juxtaposed against the actual implementation of laws which eliminate the arts, in the light of which, the frightening possibility becomes less unimaginable. The almost explicit suggestion is a warning that Albania, as the only one of the Eastern bloc countries to maintain links with Maoist China, is the most likely to fall victim to those aspects of the cultural revolution which would force it to lose touch with the romantic elements of society altogether. The use of irony lends the story an element of urgency: imploring Albania to reawaken its romantic past, and outrage: ridiculing those forces who ever imagined they could take it away. "The secret of my youth" is a sad tale of unrequited, unrequitable love and mysogyny. A man develops an obsession with a young woman named "eye", so named because of the beauty and intensity of her eyes. He eventually marries her and is overjoyed, and although she behaves perfectly as a "good wife", he gradually becomes increasingly agitated with her that his reflection does not "fill" her eyes. He is aware that she is not totally fulfilled by him and this awareness of his own shortcomings frustrates him and he begins to torment her, yet she continues to put up with him. Gradually his frustration turns to

anger and he begins to insult her. Finally he loses his temper and grabs her, screaming that her eyes were ugly and he didn't want to see her any more.

When she finally leaves, he sees his own stupidity reflected in her eyes and they become beautiful again, but of course it is too late. The insecurities of the narrator are evident in his behaviour. The true source of his frustration is the knowledge of his own impotence in the face of the unattainability of his captor in her unspoken refusal of fulfillment.

The story which at first appears to be a kind of "old woman in the vinegar bottle" tale of a husband's selfishness and greed, juxtaposed against the martyrdom of the wife, at closer reading becomes a more complex dilemma, an allegory of Albania's struggle to fulfill its true potential while Albania, forced to become nothing more than the reflection of an imposing order, with little opportunity to fulfil individual potential. Ahmeti is however, hopeful. Just as "eye" finally frees herself of her tormentor, so too can Albania (p. 266).

Ahmeti's underlying voice one is of encouragement to those who are disillusioned with the past and despondent about the future. The notion that Albania's economic and political problems can be surmounted, if people strive for perfection and learn from past mistakes is contained within the narrator's final realizations: "to attain the impossible ... to attain total bliss ... this is the secret of my youth. One more reason for living" (p. 26.)

Laço's succinct but heartfelt anecdotal tale "The pain of distant winter" is reminiscent of Chekhov in its simple realism, where hidden beneath its surface lies a much deeper, human anguish.

The story leaves the reader with a deep sensation of non-fulfillment, the retrospective yearning for a path not taken. The narrator of this tale of melancholy and regret is a lonely ageing writer whose creativity is gradually being drained away by the guilt which is eating at his conscience. The main part of the story is told from the perspective of a small boy, relating an anecdote in the narrator's childhood which he has finally come to see as the source of his guilt. He tells of a life-threatening moment when a bear approaches the boy and his mother in the forest. But it is only in retrospect that his mother had been willing to die to save his life. The straightforward narration of the tale by the writer as a young boy gives all the more poignance to the guilt of estrangement from his mother which the narrator experiences only after her death. His arduous annual journeys to her grave represent his fruitless efforts to change the past.

The three stories are united most strongly by these common themes - regret and guilt for past mistakes. The longing for a second chance, the lessons of history and the despondancy of nonfulfillment, the anger of individual impotence and the anguish of a lost past rendering an unattainable future, are the themes which run through the works of these authors who are both products of and voices of the fate of Albania. And thus these three very different yet inter-connected tales, each one involving the strongest male-female bonds: mother and son, husband and wife, can collectively can be seen as tales of human conscience, bound in the historical struggle of the Albanian people.