

# Translation Review

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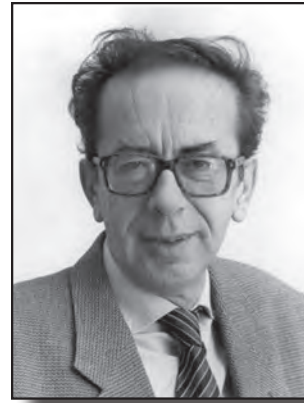
## AN INTERVIEW WITH ISMAIL KADARE

By Gjeke Marinaj

Ismail Kadare (b. 1936) is one of the best writers of our time. He has been translated into thirty languages and has received the prestigious Man Booker International Prize. Quite a few translations of his works into English have been done from works that previously had been translated into French. During over four decades of totalitarian regime in Albania, Kadare's insightful understanding of the political situation became a reassuring guideline for readers and writers in Albania. Many give Kadare credit for saving the Albanian people from entering upon a precipitous political revolution. However, when the time was right, in 1999, Kadare left the communist country to request political asylum in France, which became a signal to the Albanian people to move toward democracy. In that sense, it can be said that Kadare has had two kinds of readers. There are those who look at him as a political and cultural guide and those who see in him the makings of an international writer who has shaped world literature in the 20th century. A list of his works in English translation is featured at the end of this interview.

**Gjeke Marinaj:** Would you agree with the claim that translators have played a crucial role in reflecting your literary qualities for an international audience? To what degree do you share your success with them?

**Ismail Kadare:** Translators without a doubt play a unique role in the career of any writer who establishes an international reputation. There is no other known means to transmit literary values across languages. Translators, like everybody else in the world, can be outstanding, run-of-the-mill, or inadequate.



According to such a hierarchy, one can also determine the role that they play in making an author familiar to foreign readers. When it comes to translation, in other words, any given translated author can be fantastically lucky, more or less lucky, or truly unlucky. I have generally considered myself lucky.

**GM:** Your answer raises yet another question about the work of translators: Do you believe that translators ought to receive a one-time payment for their work, or do they perhaps deserve royalty payments for as long as the book remains in print?

**IK:** I would think that the most logical manner of rewarding translators would involve two aspects: a predetermined initial payment under the terms of a contract, as well as a percentage of sales, if the book becomes a commercial success. The first payment is necessary because, unlike writers, translators cannot work without an initial assurance. The compensation based on book sales, on the other hand, would be a "happy extra," insofar as it confirms success.

**GM:** No other Albanian writer has been translated as widely as you have. But you have also translated a considerable number of foreign authors into Albanian. What are some of the similar challenges involved in translating and writing?

**IK:** Writing is generally a multidimensional challenge. One such dimension involves language. Every writer places himself in a complicated relationship with his own language. I say “complicated” because such a relationship can sometimes be harmonious, but sometimes it may not be. The dynamic between writer and language is constantly evolving. Each tries to fight the other. The writer wants language to serve him in the most individual (meaning original) way possible. But language has its own rules, which it fanatically defends. The war between them is exhausting. But, unlike other clashes, this one is unique in that it resembles love as much as it does war. That is where literature comes from.

**GM:** Some of your books have been translated from Albanian into French, and then from French into other languages. How does this “double translation” impact the quality of a literary work?

**IK:** The major translations of my works, those that remain the best ones to this day, were done directly from Albanian into German, French, and Spanish. Among those translated into English, a few were translated from the Albanian originals and a few from the French. In other languages, too, more or less half are translations from the originals and half from other languages, mostly French.

**GM:** How do you select works to translate into Albanian? What are the criteria you employ when deciding which works are worth your time and effort?

**IK:** The little that I have translated I have done for my own pleasure. I have never had to translate a single line of poetry or prose for any other reason.

The last book I published before leaving communist Albania in 1990, *An Invitation to the*

*Writer’s Studio*, carries the feeling of a farewell throughout the pages, the tone of a testament. Although I was convinced that the farewell was only temporary, a departure is a small death (*partir, c’est un peu mourir*), even though such a mood was unavoidable.

*An Invitation to the Writer’s Studio* contains three parts. The first part comprises both short and longer poems, the second includes translations, and the third consists of notes on various subjects. The second part I titled “Guests in the Studio.” The poets whose works I translated, in other words, I considered guests in my own home, which is the highest honor an Albanian can grant someone. And since they were guests in my studio, they were also guests in the Albanian language. Just as a host strives to make his guests comfortable in his home, I worked hard to make my colleagues feel comfortable in the Albanian language. In short, I have perhaps paid more artistic attention to them than to myself.

Every translation has naturally been an act of friendship for me. The process has been an inseparable part of the challenge of artistic production. I have tested myself, as well as the ability of the Albanian language to “play host” to foreign friends.

The Albanian language is a magnificent tool of expression. It stands up to the most difficult and challenging texts. Albanian and foreign experts routinely confirm that the Albanian translations of Shakespeare and Dante are among the best. I have mainly chosen similarly difficult texts. When I was a student in Moscow, I translated Mayakovsky’s most compelling but also most difficult poem, “A Cloud in Trousers,” scrupulously respecting the poem’s almost demoniac technique. Yet another translation, or rather a retranslation, that served as a kind of a personal challenge was Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia*. In that case, I tried to challenge both myself and the Albanian language regarding whether I would be able to preserve in the

translation its two defining characteristics. The first consisted of a set of imposing verse lines constructed with equally imposing composites of two or three words, which, as Aeschylus' contemporaries used to argue, he employed to "intimidate the audience." In numerous languages, this proud posture has either faded or been lost entirely, and this has not always been the fault of translators. But since Albanian, like ancient Greek or German, naturally employs composite words, it was possible to retain the quality of the original text. The other challenge was to preserve the nebulous saturation, the darker parts of many of Aeschylus' verses that are not rationally explicable. It sometimes seems as if the translator's job is to "explain" the literary work. But I think that the translator ought to not only retain the clarity but also loyally transmit ambiguities and uncertainties. This "uncertainty" — the fog — which is often enigmatic is common in ancient literature. We should not be afraid of it. It is part of the transcendental intentions, one of the noblest of all art.

Other poems, like François Villon's "The Ballad of the Hanged Man" or Arthur Rimbaud's "The Drunken Boat," I have translated with the goal of translating ambiguity. The same goes for other works. Since this interview focuses on translation, let me also offer a personal anecdote. As I have described it in "Invitation to the Writer's Studio," I impatiently translated Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat" at a time when my French was still not good enough. Among other mistakes, I entirely misinterpreted two lines in the ninth stanza. The French version reads:

Pareils à des acteurs de drames très —  
antiques,  
Les flots roulant au loin leurs frissons de  
volets.

Which can be translated as:

Like the actors of very ancient tragedies  
The waves rolling away in a shiver of  
shutters.

I translated them into Albanian as:

Like blasts at the endings of ancient  
tragedies  
Loudly the waves crashed into the hull.

When the book was published in France, I suggested to the publisher that he remove the fragment, but he thought it was an interesting curiosity and left it as it was. As a consequence, the two lines were translated into French!

Comme les finales grondants des tragédies  
antiques,  
Les vagues bruyamment venaient battre la  
coque.

I can only imagine how appalled Rimbaud's numerous admirers must have been!

**GM:** Do you think that works in translation ought to include an introductory note written by the translator, outlining the various challenges s/he faced during translation as well as explaining the choices s/he has made?

**IK:** It depends on the work. Obviously, it also depends on the translator. I think that every effort aimed at improving the interpretation of a given work is a valuable one.

**GM:** A number of your novels have been translated by Albanians living abroad. But lately foreigners like David Bellos have shown an increased interest in translating your works. Do you think that the best translators of your works are those who best know the Albanian language or those who best know the language being translated into?



**IK:** Translators ought to know both languages well. But, whereas they ought to know the original language of the work exceedingly well, without necessarily being able to write in it, they should obviously be able to perfectly understand and write in the language of translation. The language into which the book is translated, in other words, plays the crucial role in this adventure.

**GM:** One more question about your relationship with translators: Do you work closely with them throughout the translation process, or do you give them room to play around with the text, accepting the fate of the translation whatever it may be?

**IK:** I believe that close consultations with translators are necessary. But, obviously, they should not be exaggerated either.

**GM:** While writing under the strict surveillance of the communist regime, which sometimes caused you trouble, you often resorted to a kind of allegory that has become immediately recognizable among Albanian readers. How can one translate “Dimri i madh” (“The Great Winter”), not the lexicon aspect of the work but the indirect employment of the allegoric language contained therein?

**IK:** This subject is too rich to be contained in a single interview. “Dimri i vetmisë së madhe” was translated and published abroad as early as 1978, when the ferocity of the Albanian dictatorship was at a height. Readers in the free world understood the meaning of the work, even though it was written in a country that was very far from free. I believe that those readers comprehended the crux of the work: the general tableau of the communist world. While the socialist realist literature of the eastern bloc described this world in vivid colors full of optimism, this novel painted exactly the

opposite picture: dark, desperate, dreadful. Take, for example, the scene of the official reception of the Albanian communist regime where the ghost of the dead prime minister roams around, gunshot wounds visible on the body, as if in one of Shakespeare’s plays. You know very well what socialist realist literature was, so you understand that such a scene was inconceivable at the time.

**GM:** It has recently become quite common to publish original poetry translations alongside the original poems. Do you see such a practice as useful? Does it put too much focus on the translation of individual words as opposed to the overall substance of the piece?

**IK:** I believe that publications in two languages, as you describe them, are useful.

**GM:** Could a translation be better than the original? If so, would you say that the translator is at fault for deceiving — even if slightly so — the reader?

**IK:** It could happen, especially in poetry, but rarely. It strikes me as impossible for this to happen with prose. With poetry, if the translator is especially talented, the paradoxical situation you describe could arise in certain circumstances.

**GM:** I am sure you have read *The Iliad* in more than one language. What are your thoughts on the translation of that work’s first line?

**IK:** Your question probably stems from something that I may have written or spoken about at a conference — can’t quite recall where — concerning that work’s first line, which is practically the first line in our world’s greatest poetic legacy. This observation is not originally mine, but I have expanded on the thoughts of the great Albanian author Faik Konica,

who claimed a century ago that the first line of *The Iliad* has been inaccurately translated for over two thousand years. Konica was a rather whimsical author who reveled in word games, but in this observation he was entirely correct. He was deeply knowledgeable in the major European languages, including Latin and ancient Greek. To support his claim, he pointed to a French version of Homer's line, which in English goes something like this:

Sing, O goddess, the anger of Achilles, son of Peleus

Konica writes that the word "Achilles" is the only correctly translated word in that line. "Sing," according to him, in the original is actually "tell us," a more emphatic, common expression. The word "goddess" in the original is actually "young woman," referring to the young women who would chant prophecies or poems, something like the rhapsodists or the muses and the fairies. But the most egregious mistake, according to Konitz, is the word "anger." In ancient Greek, the line begins with "menin," the accusative of "menis," which describes a grudge, a prolonged and profound resentment, the opposite of a short-lived fit of anger. Achilles' resentment lasts for weeks. Konica thought that it was a deep depression. (According to him, also, "menis" moved through Latin into "mania" and from there into other languages, where it came to refer to a sort of obsession or sick preoccupation.) Unsparring as he was, Konica went on to show that even "son of Peleus" was not an accurate translation, because the original words were "Achilles of the Peleuses," meaning Achilles of that tribe, and for the ancient inhabitants of the Balkans, one's tribe was a more important identification than one's father . . . .

**GM:** Which of the translations of your works do you consider the most accomplished, and why?

**IK:** Three of my translators have been recognized with various awards: Joachim Rohm, who translates into German; Ramon Sanchez, into Spanish; and David Bellos, into English. For German and Spanish, they have won awards given for the best translations in any given year, while the Man Booker Prize was for the English-language translation.

**GM:** What have you done, as a world-renowned writer, to promote other Albanian writers?

**IK:** I believe that I have made efforts to promote my Albanian colleagues. Some ten books written by both Albanian and Kosovar authors have been translated into French with my involvement. Most of them include introductions that I wrote. One of these volumes is a massive anthology of some six hundred pages containing twenty-six Albanian authors, both old and new. It was published in 1978 by Fayard.

To make Albanian literature better known abroad, I also volunteered to head the journal *Les lettres albanaises*, which was published in French in Tirana. Thousands of pages were translated and published in that journal, but very little was picked up by Western publishers to republish abroad. One can only imagine why that was.

**GM:** You are perhaps least known in the United States. Favorable reviews in highly reputable publications, such as the article titled "Ismail Kadare: A Modern Homer or Albanian Dissident?" published in the journal *World Literature Today*, seem not to have helped. Is this perhaps connected to the poor quality of translations into English, or is there some other reason?

**IK:** I have published fifteen books in the United States so far. I have been published there since 1971, which was highly surprising for a writer

coming from an isolated Stalinist country. Building a reputation in the Anglo-Saxon world, of course, is much harder than in Europe, but I am nevertheless fairly satisfied. I will give two examples to illustrate why I do not believe that I am least known in the United States. Many years ago, when my book *Chronicle in Stone* was published in New York, the eminent author John Updike wrote a very favorable and warm review in *The New Yorker*. I have been greatly touched by that article's noble posture. I use the word "noble" because John Updike was significantly better established than I was. I have always prized the generosity of American writers toward their colleagues.

Other examples that reflect the engagement of the English-speaking world include the various invitations I have received from Columbia, Princeton, and Bard College, as well as the Man Booker Prize in 2005. ❖

*This interview was translated by Elidor Mehilli.*

**The following works by Ismail Kadare have appeared in English translation.**

*The General of the Dead Army*. Tr. Derek Coltman, from Jusuf Vrioni's French version. Kuoleen armeijan kenraali (suom. Seppo Tuokko, 1972).

*The Wedding*. Tr. Ali Cungo, from J. Vrioni's French version, 1968.

*The Castle*. Tr. P. Quesku, from Jusuf Vrioni's French version, 1974. / *The Siege*. Tr. David Bellos, from Jusuf Vrioni's French version, 2008.

*Chronicle in Stone*. Tr. from the Albanian by Arshi Pipa, 1987.

*The Three-Arched Bridge*. Tr. John Hodgson.

*Doruntine*. Tr. Jon Rothschild.

*The Palace of Dreams*. Tr. Barbara Bray, from Jusuf Vrioni's French version, 1993.

*The Concert*. Tr. B. Bray, from Jusuf Vrioni's French version, 1994.

*The File on H*. Tr. David Bellos, from Jusuf Vrioni's French version, 1998.

*Albanian Spring*. Tr. Emile Capouya.

*Elegy for Kosovo*. Tr. Peter Constantine.

*Spring Flowers, Spring Frost*. Tr. David Bellos, from Jusuf Vrioni's French version, 2002.

*Agamemnon's Daughter: a Novella and Stories*. Tr. David Bellos, 2003.

*The Successor: a Novel*. Tr. David Bellos, from Tedi Papavrami's French version, 2005.