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Ismail Kadaré’s *The Shadow*  
Literature, Dissidence, and Albanian Identity

Peter Morgan

In the article, Ismail Kadaré’s 1986 novel, *The Shadow*, is analysed as a form of *apologia pro vita sua* about the deformations of life under a dictatorial regime. This interpretation demonstrates that Kadaré was a dissident in his own terms during the reign of the dictatorial regime and that this type of opposition was something different from the political and ideological critique of post-totalitarianism. Throughout his work, Kadaré has suggested the existence of an alternative Albania to that of the regime, intimating that the historical roots of his nation can give birth to different versions of Albanian identity to that propagated by the Albanian Party of Labour. Using the figure of the legendary Albanian hero, Konstantine, in *The Shadow; The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*, and elsewhere in his oeuvre, Kadaré links the contemporary problematics of dissidence and existential authenticity under the dictatorship to historical patterns of Albanian culture and individual existence.

**Keywords:** Albanian socialism; Eastern European dissidence; Ismail Kadaré; *The Shadow; The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*; Konstantine and Doruntine

For the duration of his writing life Ismail Kadaré has been the subject of criticism for compromising by remaining in Albania under the socialist regime of Enver Hoxha, and for having survived as a writer where so many others were silenced or punished with imprisonment, labour camps, and death. Kadaré certainly did not want for enemies during the life of the regime. He was hated by the *Sigurimi*, the state secret police, by factions in the Writers Union and around the dictator, and by parties outside of Albania, ranging from the conservative exile community in the United States to various figures of Balkan politics, for...
which his Albanian patriotism was a provocation. For those outside Albania, Kadaré’s greatest fault was his failure to speak out against the regime. They wanted a figure such as Solzhenitsyn or Havel, a dissident in the mould of post-1968 Eastern Europe. However, this type of dissidence was not possible in Albania. After the death of Stalin, Hoxha pursued a Stalinist-style dictatorship, even breaking with Khrushchev in 1961 as a result of the latter’s revisionism and critique of the Stalin cult. The country was closed off from Eastern and Western Europe from the early sixties until after the death of Enver Hoxha in 1985. Its only foreign links were with Maoist China for about ten years during the radical phase of the Cultural Revolution.

Kadaré was a precocious talent, who published his first poems as a teenager, and he was sent for training as a writer to the Gorki Institute for World Literature in Moscow. He finished his first novel, *The Town Without Signs*, in 1959, while he was still in his early twenties. His second novel, *The General of the Dead Army*, appeared in the journal *The Voice of Youth* in 1962, and in novel form the following year. Kadaré had returned to Albania from Moscow in late 1960 as a result of the break in relations between Albania and the Soviet Union, and remained as a writer in his native country until the fall of the regime in 1990. His works merge his country’s legends, traditions, and history with contemporary communist reality. The result is a body of novels, essays, and poems that are both provocative and patriotic. In works such as *Doruntine, The Three-Arched Bridge, The Great Winter, and The Niche of Shame*, Kadaré used the techniques of Aesopian language to provide an alternative image of Albania to that propagated by the communist regime of Enver Hoxha. After the fall of the regime, questions were asked about Kadaré’s manner of survival as a writer under the regime. The atmosphere of suspicion, condemnation, and recrimination came to a head in 1997 when Noel Malcolm, a leading commentator on Balkan affairs, brought the issue of Kadaré’s past out into the open.

Although Malcolm recognized Kadaré’s literary merit, he reiterated the view that Kadaré remained “an employee of the Palace of Nightmares that was Enver Hoxha’s Albania.” So far the controversy has focused on Kadaré’s life and political environment,
largely ignoring the huge and varied literary output in which the proof of Kadaré’s status as a writer is to be found.

Agnes Heller, Vladimir Tismăneanu, and others have used the term “post-totalitarian” to describe the “loosening of state controls and the decline of the ideological constraints imposed by the ruling parties” in Eastern European post-Stalinist environments, especially after Khrushchev. Ismail Kadaré was not—and could not be—a political dissident in the post-totalitarian mode. This was not an option for anyone remaining in this country. He was an Albanian patriot and a writer. As a patriot, he imagined an Albanian life different from that of the socialist “new man” proclaimed by the regime. As a writer, he described an everyday reality which was far from ideal, eschewing for the most part the socialist realism that was the ritual form of mediation between socialist reality and the classless society of the end of history. Therein lay his dissidence.

In the following paper, I propose an analysis of Kadaré’s novel of 1986, *The Shadow*, as a form of *apologia pro vita sua*, not as a dissident’s novel, but rather as a novel about the deformations of life under a dictatorial regime. The literary analysis and interpretation is aimed at demonstrating that Kadaré was a dissident in his own terms during the regime and that this type of opposition was something different from the political and ideological critique of post-totalitarianism. Kadaré’s works were certainly unpalatable to the regime, and his criticisms were scathing, but his primary intention was not ideological critique. His works engage at a deeper level of Albanian reality.

Three aspects of the narration make *The Shadow* a difficult work, particularly for those unfamiliar with Kadaré’s life, environment, and works. The first aspect is the context of the Albanian dictatorship, which is present in all of Kadaré’s work and which in this novel, as in other works, is given a metafictional structure by Kadaré’s retrospective commentary. The second difficult aspect is the division of the narrative interest between the two nameless protagonists, the narrator and his friend the writer. These two figures can be seen to characterize, respectively, the Albanian bureaucrat and the creative writer (and alter-ego of Kadaré). The narrator’s one completed screenplay is an adaptation
of an earlier novel by the writer. These two figures will be referred to as the “narrator” and the “writer” throughout. The third aspect is Kadaré’s use of a leitmotif from his earlier work, the medieval Albanian legend of Konstantine and Doruntine. These three aspects will be discussed in detail below.

The Metafictional Contextualization

According to an interview with Alain Bosquet in 1995, *The Shadow* was written at a time when Kadaré believed that he would not live to see the end of the regime. The manuscript was hidden in his apartment until 1987 when he smuggled it to France under the title of *The Three K’s*, a translation into Albanian of a novel by the left-liberal German novelist Siegfried Lenz. The names had been rendered German throughout and the location switched from Paris to Vienna, but as Kadaré notes, the disguise was thin, and was designed primarily for the inspectors at the airport, should his hand luggage be searched. In Paris the manuscript was consigned to the safety of a bank vault by Claude Durand, editor of the major French publishing house, Fayard, with the authorization to re-open it when he thought it appropriate. The subtext of the agreement was, however, that the novel should not be published until after Kadaré’s death, as Kadaré notes in his interview with Alain Bosquet: “My contract with him was clear: the novel should only be published after my death.”

The predication of the novel’s appearance on the death of the author brings the contemporary political situation into the ambit of the novel, inviting the reader to consider the specificities of dictatorship, intimidation, and physical peril to comprehend its bizarre plot. We must read *The Shadow* in terms of this retrospective contextualizing. The context functions as a metafictive device, obliging us to read *The Shadow* as a posthumous work, the final testament of a writer whose death occurs at the behest of the dictator. The time of the novel is the narrator’s present in the early- to mid-1980s. Rumours abound of the blindness, senility, and imminent death of the Supreme Guide, the unnamed dictator, around whose body the various factions are gathering, led by his hawkish wife. The metafiction of the author’s death
consigns the fiction to history, bringing about closure and implying a perspective on the ending, which would otherwise be lacking, namely as the final reckoning of the author, Kadaré, with the dictatorship of Enver Hoxha. It presages one of Kadaré’s main themes of the late 1980s, the conflict between the writer and the dictator as an endgame of power and imagination in the post-war history of Eastern European socialism.

The narrator and the writer

Kadaré’s narrator is a self-confessed “failed screenwriter” employed in the Foreign Affairs department of the State Film Studios in Tirana. He travels frequently to France to finalize cultural exchange agreements between the Albanian and French governments regarding the showcasing of Albanian films. The narrator is well-connected to the Party via an uncle who is a communist stalwart with powerful contacts. On his trips to the French capital, the narrator has made contact with various figures among cinema, theatre, and cultural circles, in particular a young actress, Sylvaine Doré, with whom he has an affair. A second figure enters the story as an alter-ego of Kadaré himself: a writer who befriended the narrator while both were studying in Moscow. Back in Albania their paths diverge as a result of individual talent and political forces. The writer has been harassed by the regime and has been limited in his contacts with the West. The one more or less successful work of the scriptwriter is based on the story of the writer’s last weeks in Moscow before being repatriated by the Albanian regime in 1960.

The narrator is neither a party stalwart nor a dissident. He is a typical member of the *nomenklatura*, the bureaucratic intelligentsia of the socialist state. He is ordinary in every respect, other than that he benefits from the travel privileges that come with his job as cultural ambassador. He hates the regime, but does not dare step out of line; he dreams of escape to France, but does not pursue the possibility of seeking exile. He is a scriptwriter, but has never seen his scripts turned into film. A descendant of Kafka’s Central European protagonists, he is an Albanian everyman of the bureaucratic-administrative class, caught among a welter of opposing
and irrational forces. He typifies the inauthenticity of everyday life in Albania under the regime, where inauthenticity is marked by the sense that “life is elsewhere” (Kundera) and that the reality of the socialist Alltag obstructs human living. The narrator is not represented as culpable, but as having so far been incapable of extraordinary behaviour.

If the narrator’s defining characteristic is his lack of talent and his inability to realize his dreams, his friend the writer is defined by his talent, to the point that his writing takes precedence over his life. Like Kadaré, he has written an autobiographical novel in which his Moscow experiences are imagined in terms of an ancient Albanian literary motif. Kadaré brings into The Shadow material from his 1976 novel The Twilight of the Steppe Gods. To understand this self-reflexivity in The Shadow, we must turn briefly to that earlier autobiographical work.

The Twilight of the Steppe Gods and the mise en abyme

In The Twilight of the Steppe Gods, Kadaré retells his experiences at the Gorki Institute in Moscow leading to the repatriation in late 1960 as a result of the break between Albania and the Soviet Union in the wake of Stalin’s death. In Moscow, Kadaré witnessed at first hand the Pasternak-affair and learned what it meant to be a writer in a communist regime. However the young writer from Gjirokastra also experienced Russian civilisation and the life of a major Eastern European metropolis and modern capital of a world power. Forced to abandon his Muscovite girlfriend, a medical student named Lydia Snieguina, and recognizing that the return will result in a dramatic curtailment of his intellectual freedom, Kadaré is repatriated to the tiny, Stalinist, and isolationist country of his birth at the end of The Twilight of the Steppe Gods. The Albania to which he returns is imagined as a realm of the dead:

As I left, I imagined her standing on the Boulevard Tverskoï, her face turned towards the darkened grill of the Institute garden, waiting in vain for me to return from that region from which no one has ever returned.7
Moreover the theme of return to a nether world is associated with a motif which deepens and complicates the associations of return for the young Albanian. During his last days with Lydia, the autobiographical narrator imagines himself as the Albanian legendary hero, Konstantine:

We passed Pushkin Square and entered Gorki Street. The cafes were closed. In the half-light we straddled the shop-windows, just as in the legend, the living and the dead sit astride the one horse.8

Suffering from fever, he imagines himself as the dead Konstantine, who has given his pledge to see his lover before returning to the grave:

‘I gave you my word.’ Nothing remained for me but to shake the earth from my hair’ I have given you my word,’ I repeated, ‘for a long time, since the time of the great ballads.’ She looked at me intently, as if I were delirious. I was tempted to say to her: ‘You wouldn’t understand that, you have other ballads and other gods.’ ‘But you’re burning!’ Lydia said to me. You should have stayed at home. She was right, I shouldn’t have come out. But I had given my word. It was the fault of that ancient legend. 9

In the ancient Balkan legend, Konstantine is the youngest of nine brothers and one sister, Doruntine. Against her mother’s wishes, Doruntine has been married out to a Bohemian nobleman; however Konstantine has promised that he will return Doruntine to her mother should anything happen to the family. Shortly after Doruntine’s marriage, the nine brothers go to war and all die, including Konstantine. Kneeling before his grave, the mother rebukes her last born for having failed to fulfil his pledge. That night Konstantine emerges from his crypt to seek out his sister in Bohemia and restore her to her mother before returning to his cold place of rest. In Kadaré’s retelling of the story, Konstantine is instrumental in convincing his family to accede to the Bohemian nobleman’s request for the hand of Doruntine in spite of their misgivings. The subtext of Konstantine’s insistence lies in his intention to distance the object of his incestuous desires. Kadaré uses this story throughout his works, tailoring and modifying it as required, to emphasise the various themes of honour, the pledge, incest,
and exogamy. The legend has its origins in the middle ages at a
time when the Albanian lands were on the margins of Byzantium,
between eastern and western Christendom, and when the Slav
kingdoms were vying for dominance. In his novel, *Doruntine*,
written only a short time after *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*,
Kadaré would turn the story of the return of Doruntine into an
allegory of Albanian identity lost and re-found.

In *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*, the Konstantine theme is
associated primarily with the pledge, or *bessa*, the tribal and early
feudal statement of personal honour in Albanian culture. In
Kadaré’s mythology, this pledge symbolizes the facticity of ethno-
national identity and belonging. The novel ends with the young
writer’s pledge to return to Albania rather than to consider alter-
natives of exile. The pledge is thus situated at the beginning of
Kadaré’s adult self-consciousness, underwriting his existence as
an Albanian intellectual and writer after his return from Moscow
in 1960. It gives expression to Kadaré’s recognition and accep-
tance of ethnic identity as the primary formative and motive
force in his existence as a writer, and it expresses a Herderian
sense of the relationship of language and culture.

In *The Shadow*, the figure of the writer, based on Kadaré, and
the identification with the legendary Konstantine, is taken a step
further. The complex narrative structure of reduplication in *The
Shadow* can be illustrated as a double *mise en abyme* in which the
current text recursively reiterates material from the earlier text, *The
Twilight of the Steppe Gods*, which in turn is based on Kadaré’s life.
In each of these reduplications the figure of Konstantine gains in
symbolic importance.

**Konstantine the Albanian hero**

In their first rendezvous over dinner, the Frenchwoman
Sylvaine and the narrator of *The Shadow* discuss his screenplay,
which is based on the writer’s story of his return to Albania.

‘I especially liked the passage where the main character—that’s
you—leaves the Russian girl at the gate of the Institute and the sense
of being dead. [. . .] But that story didn’t happen to you, did it? I think
you said that it was about someone else, one of your friends at the

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Dostoyevsky Institute, if I’m not mistaken.’ ‘—The Gorki Institute.’ ‘—Yes, that’s it.’ ‘—In fact that story isn’t his either. It’s at least a thousand years old.’ ‘That’s true,’ Sylvaine agreed. ‘That comes out clearly in the script . . . The story of the dead brother who emerges from his grave in order to bring his married sister back home from a distant land. It’s an old legend, isn’t it?’

The story of Konstantine is identified as an ancient legend, which somehow has a life of its own, reappearing down the centuries to affect the lives of the writer and the “narrator”.

Perhaps it’s about a . . . how would you say it . . . an infectious story. In hearing it, one has the impression of experiencing it oneself . . . I had the impression that a part of his story had happened to me.  

The infectious history which taints those who come into contact with it is the history of Albania:

It was only natural that we others, young Albanians still studying in foreign countries, should feel a certain affinity with the Konstantine of the legend. Our country cut itself off more and more from the rest of the world and we felt excluded from that other life. We returned, one after another as if to the grave.

The story of Konstantine gathers up the later stories into itself, becoming the trope of an Albanian experience which links the three figures as one:

The only difference was that a piece of contemporary life was tied up in the macabre story of Konstantine, the separation of my friend from his companion, a student of medicine in Moscow . . . Later, perhaps, in another café in another country, the story will be retold, except that this time we will all be there on the back of Konstantine’s horse, the Muscovite, Lydia Snieguina, the Parisienne Sylvaine Doré.

The epidemic from which Albania must save itself through the repatriation of its foreign students and the establishment of closed borders is the revisionism of the Khrushchev years. It is both war and plague: an aggressive enemy from outside and an insidious disease within the host body. Kadaré’s ambiguity is deliberate: the Albanian government fears those influences from outside, which, once carried within its borders, will continue to develop and spread from body to body. The object of fear, that is, originates from inside.
as well as from outside. The forces that killed Konstantine and his brothers are the same: pestilence bred by war, a motif of destruction that occurs throughout Kadaré’s work. The image of infection is thus an expression of the fear of sameness. The closure of borders is a preventative measure aiming to stop the spread of something originating from outside. However, once present in the protected community, it will spread. The conditions exist within the closed community as well as outside for the spread of the disease and of the dissatisfaction with Stalinism, of which disease is a metaphor. The ambiguity of the metaphor lies in the implication that the politics of Albanian closure is based on the recognition of sameness. The external differences between nations are belied by the sameness of human beings in relation to questions of identity and sexual attraction. The predominant metaphor for this mixture of desire and fear, here as elsewhere in the literature of ethno-national identity, is sexual desire versus the fear of sexually transmitted disease. This sense of the dual nature of belonging—the pledge of belonging versus the drive towards otherness—is ubiquitous in Kadaré’s work, and it represents something much deeper in Albanian national consciousness than the political divide of the post-war era between the regime and its opponents.

Doruntine: sister and lover, self and other

For the narrator, the story of Konstantine is about the pledge to return to the realm of death. Yet there is a further motif in the writer’s retelling of the story. He refers to a second version in which the incestuous attraction between brother and sister underlies the motivation of departure and return. In this version, the driving force of the story is neither the pledge nor the achievement of the impossible, but the incest motif and the social ramifications of exogamy and endogamy. Doruntine is sent away at Konstantine’s behest as a means of averting the possibility of the incestuous relationship. He is the youngest of nine brothers, and the fate of the family seems unthreatened by the departure of the sister. However the brothers are suddenly wiped out by war and pestilence, leaving alive only the female side of the clan: the ageing mother at home and Doruntine far away in Bohemia.
Doruntine’s marriage to a Slav nobleman, the destruction of the male side of the clan, and the redemption of Doruntine by Konstantine are powerfully evoked throughout Kadaré’s work. In the pre-feudal environment of this legend, issues of exogamy and endogamy were central to the identity and survival of the clan. On the one hand, the sister, Doruntine, must be sent away in a symbolic statement of the necessity of marrying out to avoid inbreeding; on the other hand, her loss is felt as a weakening of the family. Against the maintenance of language, customs, and ethnic identity, exogamy is both threatening and necessary. It introduces the foreign, the other, the unknown, and the potentially dangerous into the group, and it leads to the weakening and dissipation of the group through marrying out, strengthening potential rivals and enemies. The maintenance of ethnic identity and the fear of deracination, dispersion, and loss of cultural coherence belongs anthropologically to the feudal past for most of Western Europe, but remains a powerful theme of ethno-national consciousness in parts of Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular in the Balkan lands. In its Albanian form, it reflects the mentality of a clan-based culture, in which the problematic opposition of self and other is expressed in terms of marriage and incest taboos, which determine the makeup of the group and its relationships to the outside world. This early legend of incest, to which Kadaré elsewhere refers as the Albanian equivalent of the Oedipus story, gives expression to fears of internal as well as external forces, which could undermine the social structure of the early Albanians.

The figure of Doruntine represents both the necessity of exogamy, of preserving the clan through the marrying out of daughters and sisters, and the fear of loss of identity, of deracination and assimilation to the “other.” Konstantine’s pledge to redeem his sister is the compromise on which the resolution of the conflict between the demands of the exogamous and the endogamous are based. The departure of Doruntine to marriage and of the nine sons to war represents the primacy of the exogamous and the turn outwards to the world; the return of Doruntine and the death of the sons represents the ascendancy of the counter-principle of endogamy and turning inwards. The
relationship of Konstantine and Doruntine thus consists of the two opposed movements of separation and redemption, giving expression to the ambivalence in the relationship of brother and sister, man and lover, self and other in this legend. The promise of the redemption of the sister at the point of social crisis is the price for the move outward to the world.

The Frenchwoman Sylvaine Doré in *The Shadow* embodies everything that the Albanian men in the novel imagine of a sophisticated Parisian woman, but her name is a reminder of her origins. For she is both the lover and the long-lost sister, now a European, fully assimilated to her French identity, and with no memory of her earlier existence, which is preserved in her name only. As lover and sister she represents desire and fear: she is at once the symbol of the late-twentieth century European, and the desired and feared incestuous object, symbol of Albanian isolation. The one, the modern European individual—the other, the image of a pre-feudal ethno-racial identity that has been preserved as a cultural value through the centuries of foreign and imperial domination of the Balkan Peninsula. If the narrator, and the writer, as Konstantine, are bound by their pledge to return to the country of their ethnic origins, Sylvaine Doré, the Doruntine of this novel, is the figure of the sister who has assimilated a European identity so thoroughly that she has forgotten her legendary roots in the home country, and hence is an image of cultural loss.

In the story of Konstantine and Doruntine, Kadaré finds the cultural archetype of his nation’s complex identifications of the endogamous and the exogamous, the lawful and the unlawful, of the identity-giving factors of self and other. The theme of the pledge to overcome death encapsulates the sense of fragility of Albanian identity, caught between the demands of self and other, of the opposition of similarity and difference, which, in the nation’s history, was so fraught with loss and destruction. The exogamous movement outwards towards the other represents loss (death of the brothers, abandonment of the sister); the endogamous movement inwards to the self represents closure (incest between brother and sister).

The point of the *mise en abyme* in *The Shadow* is to recapitulate this leitmotiv from Kadaré’s life and works and to show the
extent of these identifications in the contemporary Albanians’ encounter with Europe. Albanianness rests on a deeply felt sense of ambivalence towards the world outside. On the one hand it is the object of intense fantasies of escape, fulfilment, and redemption; on the other hand, the world represents fear of loss of self, deracination, and fragmentation of the bases of group identity for the narrator and the writer, Kadaré’s representatives of the contemporary Albanian nomenklatura in *The Shadow*. Using the literary technique of the *mise en abyme*, Kadaré links the contemporary problematics of dissidence and existential authenticity under the dictatorship to historical patterns of Albanian culture and individual existence.

The relationship between the writer and the narrator in *The Shadow*

The figures of the writer and the narrator shadow each other throughout the novel. The writer is introduced in relation to the screenplay, which the narrator has given to Sylvaine to read:

I told her that it was a story which a friend had told me when we were studying together in Moscow, he at the Gorki Institute of Literature and I in an academy for cinema.16

The two had met before leaving Tirana. Both had applied for scholarships to study in Moscow. The writer is at first rejected, ostensibly on account of tubercular shadows on his x-rays, a diagnosis which turns out to be mistaken once the checks on his personal record have been completed (62). The closeness of the two young men is expressed in an image of physical identity as they search their x-rays for the signs of difference which have resulted in the rejection of the writer:

We looked there for the small spot which had caused the hold-up for him, but the shades of our thoracic cavities on the two x-rays looked so identical that after we had passed the negatives back and forward a few times, we got them mixed up in the end and felt as though we had found ourselves one hundred years later in front of a common grave, looking for our own bones.17
While the narrator and the writer share the same experiences of youth, love, and education in Moscow, their paths diverge after the enforced repatriation. Both realize that their task as creative intellectuals will be difficult in their homeland, where cinematic works are subjected to even greater control than literature.

Hoping that his screenplay with its memories of their youth in Moscow will bring them together again, and wanting to tell his old friend about Sylvaine, the narrator is upset to find the writer cold and aggressive:

I felt offended as rarely before, and I waited impatiently for the moment when I could leave and no longer have to put up with that contemptuous look which seemed to be saying: you’re a pain in the neck with your Lydia Snieguinas and your Doruntines, your Monsieur-le-Prince streets whose names I don’t even want to hear spoken any more.18

He wants to respond in kind: “You’ve had a certain success and you think yourself to have reached the top of Olympus, but pride comes before a fall . . . !”19 But he desists. Later he discovers that the writer is about to be placed under sanctions on account of his most recent novel.

A fortnight later I would learn of the sanctions which had been taken out against him, but I felt so bitter after our last meeting that my anger has scarcely diminished.20

Kadaré draws explicitly here, as earlier, on his own experiences of reprisals and harassment after the publication of *The Palace of Dreams* in 1981. Listening to the official debate about his friend’s new novel on the radio, the narrator hears the same expressions as he himself had been tempted to use: “The people raise you to the heights of Olympus and the people will lower you from there.”21 These words echo those used by Ramiz Alia, Hoxha’s second-in-command in the formal proceedings against Kadaré, in which the novel was criticised and the author obliged to defend himself. The narrator’s inner complicity with the regime is complete. Not only has he kept his distance from his friend out of fear of the consequences of too close a relationship, but he has replicated the response of the hated regime:
For the first time I experienced regret. It seemed to me that on that day I had called down misfortune onto his head in cursing him.22

The writer reappears as a dream-like figure clutching refugee forms and a copy of the x-rays from their youth, and makes a bizarre final appearance in Paris as a delegate of the Writer’s Union on the eve of the dictator’s death. The point is reiterated that these two figures are images of each other and that it is only the writer’s gift which separates them. At the same time they share fundamental elements of identity with their Albanian archetype, Konstantine:

In that world the majority of human beings just replay the same story. Only their looks, their hair-dos, and their height are changed, like the wigs that actors swap before returning to the stage to interpret a role which they have played over and over. Sylvaine and I did nothing other than relive that which had happened to my friend from Moscow, on that night when, in the falling snow close to the gates of the Gorki Institute, our faces pale, startled, no doubt, by the headlights of the taxis and the fanfares of socialism, the medieval figure of Konstantine appeared. Whatever we did, we could not but respond to his call, we could not repudiate our identification with the knight: the horse, the journey, all the rest had been in place for a long time. 25

The writer appears in The Shadow as the harassed intellectual under the regime and as the novelist whose work has been used by the narrator for his only successful screenplay. His work is at one level realized through this screenplay, but at a deeper level both his and the narrator’s work manifests a deeper force of identity, the archetypal figure of Konstantine, for themselves and their countrymen. Through the *mise en abyme*, Kadaré has identified the archetypal elements of their identity, and through the fiction of the screenplay he has shown how the narrator attempts and fails to emulate the writer’s creativity. The points of similarity and difference are clearly demarcated in the text. If the main theme of this novel is the perversion of the Albanian life-world and its distorted relationship to the normality of modern life in the French capital as seen through the eyes of the narrator, the secondary theme, reflected through the figure of the writer, based on Kadaré himself, is the necessary perversion of art in an inauthentic life-world.

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In the final pages, both the narrator and the writer are seen cringing in the rear of their respective taxi-carriages in a nightmarish trip through Paris. Each represents a compromise and a failure of a different kind. The narrator has failed to bring together his two realities of Albania and France to live an authentic life. Hating the regime and the life it enforces in his home country, he has compromised, survived, and thrived as a bureaucrat. However he cannot escape the Albanianness which takes him back home each time, and he does not seek refuge in France. While the narrator is a weak character—a typical Kadaréan protagonist—his return to his homeland is not motivated by his privileged position, nor is it determined by factors such as family responsibility or the inertia of habit and routine. Underlying his debilitating and inauthentic existence between Albania and France is a deeper truth for Kadaré, namely of his Albanianness. Like Mark-Alem in The Palace of Dreams, he is deeply and unchangeably Albanian. Yet authentic existence is rendered inaccessible to him by the pseudo-Albanian reality of the dictatorship. The two sides of his existence, Albania and France, reality and imagination, exist in a false existential opposition, based on the blockage between past and present, eternal unchanging Albania and the inauthenticity of the dictatorship. He, the everyday Albanian “new man,” is unable to draw on his ethno-national identity and as a result, his life swings between two poles of inauthenticity.

If the narrator lacks creativity, the writer represents the embattled realm of the imagination in the dictatorship. We see him through the eyes of his erstwhile friend and ungifted colleague as withdrawn, arrogant, and hostile. He is not a representation of the dissident-as-hero. His unpopularity with the regime is due to works such as the novel on which the narrator’s screenplay is based (The Twilight of the Steppe Gods) and a recent novel which has led to formal arraignment (echoing the controversy surrounding The Palace of Dreams). In both of these works he challenges the regime’s image of Albania rather than the ideology of socialism. Against the narrator, whose text is defined by confusion of the inner and the outer worlds, the writer is revealed as a figure that has not mixed the worlds of imagination and reality, France and Albania. In the final image he stays faithful to Albania, turning his back on the inauthenticity of life under the dictatorship.
and remaining impervious to the seductions of Paris. For the Albanian intellectual, the encounter with Paris can lead in only one of two directions: either to a betrayal of his past and exile to the West, or to a renewed and cognizant embrace of the Albanian prison as the true place of his existential identity. The blinded writer in his Parisian taxi at the end has renounced the Western environment to remain an artist and an Albanian. However, this choice also involves a compromise. He is torn between the demands of the dictatorship and those of his Albanian identity symbolized in the figure of Konstantine, the eternal Albanian.

**Dissidence and inauthentic life**

The narrator finds himself in a double world, where he can slip from one level of consciousness to another. On the boulevards of Paris he is suddenly transported by the sight of black limousines to the guns and barbed wire of Albania’s borders:

On the quays I could make out a long way off some bodies lying on the asphalt. Some twisted bits of barbed wire stretched alongside them and pools of blood stained the street. There was no difficulty in guessing that it was a shred of time straight from Albania, from the pebbly shore of Lake Pogradec. From the coast of Saranda too [. . .] You don’t have any reason to be surprised, I told myself. They are the bodies of the young people, of those who tried to cross the Albanian border. This day is also one of your days of yesteryear. During the summer holidays in Saranda, early in the morning, the police boat skirting the coastline with a cadaver on board, riddled with bullets. From the verandah of the hotel, the British tourists watched, horrified. [. . .] Remember that that’s one of your days. [. . .] the confirmation arrived whistling through the air like a missile. For sure that was a part of my past; I never tried to deny it. 24

The deep structures of Albanian experience impinge on modern consciousness, shaping it and rendering the unfamiliar familiar:

It wasn’t only the inversion of the light and the dark, as if on an x-ray. Not just the recovering of time’s thickest bed by a light cover. Nor the shadow which the flesh surrounds the bones with. It was worse. There was, as I had disclosed several days before, a sort of fundamental defect. All of the looms of time showed some sort of anomaly. Rolled into a ball, as if bent by paralysis or polio, some days began
in the evening and finished at dawn. [. . .] the worst, in spite of every-
thing, was the passage of time. From now on I was convinced that it
moved backwards, like a crab. [. . .] At a certain moment I wondered
whether I was still of this world or whether my words, just like the
beard on the face of a dead man, didn’t keep growing completely
uselessly, absurdly. 25

Transported to Lake Pogradec or the beach of Saranda, he
relives the experiences of border barbarism, which were essen-
tial to the maintenance of terror in Albania. In these images we
can identify the origins of the narrator’s traumatized conscious-
ness and sense of history as superimposed layers of time. The
history of repression and oppression in Albanian history is imag-
ined not as a progression but as an eternal recurrence in parallel
worlds. In his drunken and nightmarish sorties through the city,
the narrator experiences France as a dream world in which past
and present, East and West, are superimposed in a phantas-
imagoria of images of the forces of history, culture, and politics,
which determine the lives of both narrator and writer.

Throughout the text sexual attraction symbolizes the connec-
tion between Albania and the West. The narrator’s friends back
home expect lurid descriptions of his exploits in Paris with sexy
French women. In France he is overcome by performance anxi-
ety, failing to reach orgasm with his classy Parisian lover, Madame
V and, until the end, with Sylvaine. Consummation of the sexual
act becomes a persistent image of the problematical relationship
between Albania and the West. The narrator imagines himself
warming slowly to life on entering France, and on returning to
Albania he feels his body temperature drop and his vital energies
diminish. Yet even this powerful metaphor of life and death fails
as the narrator loses his ability to correlate the two spheres of his
existence. He finds himself incapable of reconciling the two
worlds, caught in a half-way world between reality and imagina-
tion, mapping the horrors of Albania onto Paris, just as he and his
friends had projected their imaginings of Paris onto their
Albanian reality. Finally, dogged by impotence and terror, the nar-
rator warms to life to the point where he can experience sex with
Sylvaine as an excruciating act of transmission and connection.
As the sperm separates itself from his gelid body, becoming
warm in the process and lodging in her womb, the narrator experiences the agony of the escape from death to life:

The fall was terrifying; I felt the sobs of the species oppose the final resistance to consanguinity, and the cruel whip of desire, the sin and the fear of chastisement. […] I had the impression of hearing the approaching baying of the dogs. I would have wanted to return her caresses, but I couldn’t do anything other than protect my face with my forearms from the biting dogs. […] That lasted a long time. Time seemed suspended, until I felt a cruel pain run through my spine at the instant when my sperm finally separated itself from me and, just as it was, still frozen, carrying the terror with it, like blocks of ice floating in the darkness there where the edges of the worlds part from each other, it penetrated to the depths of her womb.26

He has achieved the sexual union with Doruntine, thereby breaking both the incest taboo and the pledge to return. In a state of apocalyptic trepidation he expects to be dragged down again into the Albanian nether world:

My own suffering was enough to destroy me! […] I had sinned with my sister […] I asked myself again whether we weren’t perhaps the same being separated by chance, and whose two halves sought to rejoin each other. The taxi slid through the dark; my eyes half-closed, I waited for the fall. What I had done seemed to me more and more abominable. It wasn’t just incest. The incest in itself was just the first taboo which I had broken, the superficial manifestation of a deeper evil. I had broken another, much more important pact. I had come here under certain conditions. I was a dead person who was obliged to keep to the form which had been given him. My nationality wanted it thus. My frontiers and my destiny also.27

But the power of those forces that tortured him in the night and that appear to him without warning in the daylight of Paris seems to have been broken. As the lift takes him up to his hotel room on the way to the airport, in the final paragraphs he experiences a sense of ecstatic redemption. The transmission of the message of Albanianess, symbolized in the sexual act with Sylvaine, leads to a fantasy of personal and national redemption.

Then, as the elevator ascended, swallowing the floors, the first, the second, in a din of breaking chains, of gates and grills torn apart, of the baying of dogs, of the blow of the hammer driving the nails into the cross,
among the thorns which scratched my skin, which bloodied me without succeeding in making me turn back, I realized that the unbelievable had happened: I had broken through the border and I was still alive. [. . .] Now it was no longer the elevator which lifted me up, but an ancient hymn, and after me thousands and thousands of others mounted up on it as well, all the noble and solemn generations of Albanians leaving behind them the iciness of death amidst the bells and the songs of alleluia to the announcement, ‘Albania is risen, amen!’

In these final paragraphs, Kadaré’s prose is at its most ambiguous. The world of psychotic self-fulfilment that flashes through the narrative, intruding dream onto reality, appears to have triumphed in an insanity born of the narrator’s inability to integrate the inner and the outer worlds. In this ending, liberation to the West is revealed as the psychotic fantasy of a dying man. If this redemption can be seen as release from the dictatorship, then the ending is positive; if, however, as seems more likely, the redemption is the psychosis of a figure who is incapable of bringing together imagination and reality, the Paris of his dreams with the death-in-life in Albania, the ending is as gloomy as that of Kadaré’s model, Kafka’s *The Trial*. It confirms Albanian existence as schizoid, operating between two mutually exclusive spheres of imagination and reality, death and life, which remain incapable of resolution and which must lead, sooner or later, to tragedy.

Where the authorial figure of the writer has achieved connection and clarity through his identification with Konstantine in the original novel, *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*, the narrator of *The Shadow* does not seem to. His experience is marked by confusion, inauthenticity, and madness as he fails to reconcile the oppositions of east and west, past and present, Albania and France. He remains a victim of the dictatorship, a figure whose experience of everyday life as the gloomy, subterranean inauthenticity in his native land is incapable of preparing him for the experience of everyday life in a contemporary Western environment. Kadaré’s novel is thus a testament to contemporary Albanian reality, which disallows life as normality. Like so many heroes of earlier Central and Eastern European literature, Kadaré’s narrator is a victim not of political oppression, but of the dislocation of imagination and reality in the dictatorship. This is the tragedy of everyday life under the regime.

*East European Politics and Societies*
The critique of the inauthenticity of life under the regime, rather than of the regime itself, is the key to Kadaré’s writing. Kadaré continually seeks to peel back the layers to find an authentic core to Albanian existence. He finds this, in *The Shadow* as throughout his works of the seventies and eighties, in the pre-Muslim Albania of the Byzantine middle ages, in the bedrock of the period immediately preceding the Ottoman invasions, when the core cultural documents of the Albanians, the epics descended from the same culture as the Homeric songs, had reached their highest level of development. Throughout his work, Kadaré has suggested the existence of an alternative Albania to that of the regime, intimating that the historical roots of his nation can give birth to different versions of Albanian identity from those of the Albanian Party of Labour. In the figure of Konstantine, he finds an authenticity of existence that is Albanian and that can be pitted against the inauthenticity of life under the regime. It is a symbol of the profound ambivalences in Albanian culture towards self and other, the nation and the world, which for Kadaré determine Albanian identity. In this diagnosis the dictatorship is a symptom rather than a cause.

Kadaré does not use the *mise en abyme* to collapse past and present into the mythological time of the legend. On the contrary, he sets up the legend as a standard of Albanian being, a mythical and timeless standard against which the deformations of the present can be perceived. Konstantine’s achievement of the impossible, of making the transition from death to life and back again, symbolizes both the necessity and the impossibility of overcoming Albanian identity in order to live. This is an extremely negative assessment from a writer whose fame rests partly on his powerful evocations of his nation’s identity. However we must see it in the context of both the continuum of Kadaré’s work and the metafiction of the author’s death. Kadaré’s representation of communist Albania since his repatriation from Moscow and the first novel, *The Town without Signs* has been uniformly negative, even in the socialist realist novel, *The Great Winter*. In *The General of the Dead Army* a springtime Albania of the past is contrasted with a wintery communist present. For Kadaré the Albania of the dictatorship is inauthentic, and the art born of the dictatorship is
damaged by its provenance. In returning to his native country, rather than going into exile, he chose a life in which his art would of necessity be compromised: 29

Naturally, like every work of art born amidst violence, this one suffered from all of the deficiencies, mutilations and distortions which were the result of this monstrous era. We are clearly dealing here with a body of work that is seriously deformed. It was above all the weight of the tyranny which caused this damage. 30

In the context of the imminent death of the dictator and the battle for supremacy of the various factions in the Party, Kadaré has written a text whose reading depends on the outcome of history. Should he, the author, be killed in the struggles for power and reprisal, the archetypal fate of Konstantine will have been confirmed, and the message of Albanianness will not be passed on to the world. Kadaré’s death will signify the failure of resolution of the Albanian life-in-death, and Albanian history will continue its gloomy subterranean existence. Should he survive the regime however, the novel will await a different outcome. After the short period of office of Hoxha’s successor, Ramiz Alia, this is what happened with the revolution of 1990-1991, in which the negative paradigm was finally broken and a period of change commenced.

The publication of the novel in 1994 marks Kadaré’s dissolution of the metafiction, releasing the novel from its grave-existence in the bank-vault into the life-world of the reading environment. In what ways the new order will lead to reconfigurations and re-articulations of the Konstantine motif remains to be seen. Kadaré’s most recent work, particularly The Life, Game and Death of Lul Mazrek, implies that this fundamental motif of Albanian life and death remains productive for the author in the post-communist period.

Notes

4. Kadaré wrote and still writes in Albanian. Given the difficulty of gaining access to the wider world readership from such a little-known language, however, he has also closely supervised the translation of his works into French. My analysis is based on the French version of *L’Ombre*. For convenience, I refer to the works, *L’Ombre* and *Le crépuscule des dieux de la steppe* as *The Shadow* and *The Twilight of the Steppe Gods*, respectively, throughout the essay.


10. *L’Ombre*, 44.

11. *L’Ombre*, 44.


17. *L’Ombre*, 62.

18. *L’Ombre*, 84.


