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Myth, history and literature: Reading Ismail Kadare's "Essays on World Literature" through Giorgio Agamben's "The Coming Community"

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In 2018, the prestigious Nonino Prize, awarded annually in both national and international categories, was granted to the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and Albania's best-known novelist, Ismail Kadare. While the two recipients seem unconnected, at a closer look they share a common feature best understood through Agamben's framework of inclusivity expounded in *The Coming Community* (1993; *La comunità che viene*, 1990) as a philosophy for the post-nationalism emerging after the end of the Cold War. His *whatever singularities* paradigm argues for inclusionary acts, rejects reductionism(s) of all kinds, and promotes an ever-expanding pattern of approaching the political/cultural world. It remains relevant today, as the concept of "national" is metamorphosing into "postnational" and/or "transnational"; politics is still lagging behind and frequently hindering the process but a view to culture's (relatively) un-hierarchical standpoint is surely to enable it. Kadare's *Essays on World Literature*: A*eschylus, Dante, Shakespeare* (2018; *Tri sprova mbi letërsinë botërore*, 2017) can be read not only as a guide to the three literary masters in the title and to the Albanian writer's own fiction, but also as an implied but all the more powerful plea for "a coming community". For Kadare, this term refers to a more inclusionary cultural and political European Union and world, made up of *whatever singularities* that preserve all of their predicates (with Albania as a case in point), and which can be potentially "reduced" to a love story. In arguing for the "potentiality" (Agamben's term) of a different conception of Europe's political, social and cultural future, this article examines Kadare's literary essays (with their subtle philosophical bent) and Agamben's philosophical ones (conceived as literary vignettes) side by side. Thus, it demonstrates how Kadare demands that Albania's voice be heard in the larger European context.

SINGULARITY IN AGAMBEN'S "WHATEVER"

Agamben's *The Coming Community* was published in 1990, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. However, far from simply being a topical work, it also constituted the continuation of a debate on the idea of community (de la Durantaye 2009, 157), originating in an epigraph from Georges Bataille: "the community of those who have no community" (quoted in Blanchot 1988, 1). Agamben's philosophical essays connect the debates on community with those on ethics, emphasizing

that human beings, in order to reach their full potential are not compelled to realize a peculiar essence, historical or spiritual vocation, or biological destiny; it is only in the absence of such impositions that ethics can exist. *The Coming Community* elaborates on Blanchot's previous arguments regarding the true community being based on the unconditional incorporation of the other as the other; reducing the other and his qualities to the logic of the same would only reinforce "homogenization" and its "reductive cultural force" (Chattopadhyay 2015).

The first essay in the book, deceptively entitled "Whatever", is the most relevant for understanding Agamben's concepts and ethical standpoint. The startling yet misleadingly simple assertion of the potential and desirability for change "[t]he coming being is whatever being" is explained in the Scholastic tradition, as "*quodlibet ens est unum, verum, bonum seu perfectum* – whatever entity is one, true, good or perfect" (1993, 2). The emphasis falls on the adjective *quodlibet*, as the term which "conditions the meaning of all the others". Agamben clarifies that in Latin *quodlibet ens* does not translate as "being, it does not matter which", but "being such that it always matters", with a clear "reference to the will *(libet)*" and the "Whatever being" possessing "an original relation to desire". Moreover, "the Whatever in question here relates to singularity not in its indifference to a common property (to a concept, for example: being red, being French, being Muslim), but only in its being *such as it is* (emphasis added). Singularity is thus freed from the false dilemma that obliges knowledge to choose between the ineffability of the individual and the intelligibility of the universal" (2–3). Singularity matters as long as it maintains its status of *whatever singularity*, as long as it refers to "such-and-such being [...] reclaimed from its having this or that property, [...] reclaimed for its being-such, for belonging itself". This acceptance of singularity leads to "whatever you *want*, that is, lovable". Therefore, the relationship between the one doing the love (the Lover) and the one being loved (the Lovable) has to be one of total acceptance, with the Lover desiring "the loved one *with all of its predicates*, its being such as it is"; "Thus, whatever singularity (the Lovable) is never the intelligence of some thing, of this or that quality of essence, but only the intelligence of an intelligibility", in a "movement" which according to Plato is described as "erotic anamnesis", that is "the movement that transports the object not toward another thing or another place, but toward its own taking-place-toward the Idea" (3).

THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF KADARE'S "ESSAYS"

Albania's position in the political landscape of our times has recently become a point of heated dispute. Part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, invaded by Italians and Germans during World War II, it was isolated for decades even from its communist neighbors during Enver Hoxha's dictatorship. After the end of communism, it was an interested party in the Kosovo War, and has been an official EU candidate since 2014, although the accession talks were abruptly stopped in October 2019 and then restarted in March 2020. Arguably Albania is in dire need of surpassing this political limbo state, and of finally being included in and accepted by the rest of the continent.

Kadare's ideas regarding Albania in Europe, as exposed in his fiction, have already constituted the topic of interest for different scholars.[1] In Kadare's (2012) own words:

> Meanwhile Albania has to fight the efforts that aim to change its European orientation, which appear as a major risk in its life. Sometimes reasons for the necessity of Europe are not always clearly formulated. Therefore, I would like to repeat the words: we need you. Citing a poet earlier in our conversation, you made it [sic] easier for me the astonishing paraphrasing of another poet who says that there are cases when love appears to be one of the highest forms of reason.

Essays on World Literature were written at different times; the first during the final years of the dictatorship, the other two during postcommunism and in the context of EU enlargement post-Maastricht. They all skillfully blend myth and literature as well as pointing out to a chronology of the different stages in Albanian history. "Aeschylus, the Lost" portrays Albania as "lost" with the other Balkan countries under multiple empires, "Dante, the Inevitable" shows Albania as the "inevitable" victim of the communist totalitarianism, and "Hamlet, the Difficult Prince" represents Albania's "difficult" contemporary situation. On a more personal level, the essays are "important documents of self-disclosure" which "illustrate the hybridity underlying Kadare's *creativity* – how he travelled across the world through books and circled back to Albanian customs and culture" (Kokobobo 2018, x, emphasis added).

Kadare's remarkable knowledge of canonical European literature enables him to perform intricate cultural journeys towards and away from fundamental sources of inspiration. Benjamin's parable, recounted by Agamben in the essay "Halos", helps to explicate the role of Kadare as an author who originally re-positions such sources and creates his own cultural canvas. The parable features a "rabbi, a real cabbalist" who claims that for the kingdom of peace to come, total destruction is not required, nor is the beginning of "a completely new world"; the mere displacement of "this cup, or this bush or this stone just a little", in spite of its overt banality, holds the promise, the hope of a most desirable change. Humans cannot achieve such a feat, and "it is necessary that the Messiah come" (Agamben 1993, 54). Benjamin's version of the story centers on a "world to come" where "everything […] will be just as it is here. Just as our room is now, so that will be in the world to come; where our baby sleeps now, there too it will sleep in the other world […]. Everything will be just as it is now, just a little different" (54). In this context, I read Kadare's eternal return to Albanian culture and customs, framed by the larger context of European culture and customs as a means of arguing for a cultural and political future which will potentially retain its essence, but with a difference. As for the much-needed Messiah, that is clearly the writer himself, who by transcending barriers of time and place may achieve the "small displacement". Interestingly, after the publication of *Essays in World Literature*, Kadare became the recipient of another prestigious award, the 2020 Neustadt International Prize.

GHOSTS AND GUESTS IN "AESCHYLUS, THE LOST"

The first essay opens with a musing on the mysterious mechanisms of creation, frustrated in the case of ancient writers, "whose entire lives have been enveloped

in oblivion" (Kadare 2018, 3). The space of creation that Kadare imagines for his ancient counterpart is Spartan-looking, but spiritually enriched by a thorough knowledge of Homer's words. The "murky light" is being kept out in winter, the flimsy barrier between the artist and his world, while the light which possibly colors Aeschylus' tragedies is comparable to "the dark north" which later will come to pour itself as "the darkness inside Shakespeare" (4). As readers we experience the feeling that we are in Walter Pater's "House Beautiful", erected on the grounds of affinities between great artists, where world literature itself resides. As the third essay will also reveal, the cultural sinews of world literature are likewise bound together by the analogous motif of vengeance which both links Aeschylus' and Shakespeare's fictional worlds and shapes Albanian realities, via "the […] customs still present in the Albanian mountains" (Kokobobo 2018, xi).

Kadare offers a convincing cultural alternative in his particular rewriting of the origins of tragedy which, he claims, are not to be found in the Dionysian parties but in "the deeply vivid funerary and marital rights of the region" (xi). This originated in the comparison made by a 16th century Italian critic, between the chorus in the Greek tragedy and the polyphonic music of Balkan funerary rites (Kadare 2018, 87). Kadare elaborates on this and confidently de-stabilizes Nietzsche's explanation of the origins of tragedy which disregarded death and marriage as "the true and unfairly denied parents of tragedy" (11). In the Balkans, Greek and Albanian funerary rites feature mourners with "self-inflicted scars" who read their lines like actresses, the burial area itself is "nearly identical to the great tragic theatre", an "unusual space with its hole, or absence in the middle" where the "main protagonists", mute, caught "between kingdoms" must leave others "speak on their behalf" (13–14).

Furthermore, Kadare supports his argument about tragedy on linguistic grounds. He notes the similarities between the ancient Greek *hypokrites*, the word for "actor" whose actual significance is "liar" and the Albanian expression "crying according to the laws"; furthermore, the word "law" in Albanian is the same as "to read", and as "a participle" "it can mean […] to sing a funerary song", so that "'crying according to the laws' means to cry as per a codified text" (14). This peculiar instance of revealing the linguistic correspondence between the ancient Greek and Albanian recalls Agamben's "example", "one singularity among others, which, however, stands for each of them and serves for all", both "treated in effect as a real particular case" and not being able to serve "in its particularity" (1993, 10–11). The interest in etymologies is shared by both Agamben and Kadare, as it is their relatedness to philosophical issues. Agamben, following Wittgenstein, has reinforced the idea that "philosophical problems become dearer if they are formulated as questions concerning the meaning of words" (1999a, 177).

The shift from the *whatever singularity* of language/culture to the political/ethical one is made via the introduction of the (in)famous Albanian *Code of Leke Dukagini*, or the Kanun, arguably the *whatever singularity* of Albanianness, the centuries-old alternative to the state law.[2] The Kanun, as the constant regulator of Albanian life and death, is depicted by Kadare as instrumental for his re-writing of the origins of tragedy. For example, according to some of its articles, the killer is compelled to take part

in the funerary rites as a guest in the victim's house and to eat together with the relatives of the deceased; thus, in the Balkans, the funerary ceremony paradoxically resembles a "theatre of life" (Kadare 2018, 15). The professional mourners, exhausted by the silence of the corpse, "began to dream boldly and sinfully of the dead speaking back", a dream that sanctioned another birth of tragedy; the tragedians raised the dead from their grave and granted them the tale of "their demise" (15).

Agamben claims that "[t]he antinomy of the individual and the universal has its origin in language" and he coins the term "linguistic being" to clarify where examples take place (1993, 10–11). The "linguistic being" is trapped between belonging and not belonging to itself, since language itself is defined as the class of all classes that do not belong to themselves (10). Moreover: "Linguistic being" which is also "being-called […] is at the same time a singularity" (10). Agamben's concept of "linguistic being" is illustrated in Kadare's return to the topic of language towards the end of the first essay. In this context, the *whatever singularity* of Albanian language is exemplified via the causative form of the verb "to be" which is "that I were", and which thwarts efforts at translation. "That I were", Kadare claims, translates more or less as "I wish I could be good and just"; the alternative form, "that I were not", means "my being is undesirable, perverse and unfair" (2018, 88). Kadare describes Albanian as a "self-cursing language", the space of a "tragic fatality", which decrees "the transgressive nature of certain states of being" (88), torn between the desire for being and not-being or, in Agamben's formulation, trapped between belonging and not belonging to itself (10).

The *ghost* motif is also used by Kadare to contend for the profound interconnectedness between Greeks and Albanians, in terms of social practices, culture and language. In Greek plays the ghost played the multiple roles of "the investigator, the witness, or the instigator of vengeance and remorse"; Kadare cites Jean Pierre Vernant's observation on the common origins of the ghost and the tombstone, the "dead's double, and shadow". The silence of the tombstone is similar to that of the ghost, and the expression "silent like a tombstone" actually contains a plea for speech, manifested in the mourners' swearing "to this stone" (Kadare 2018, 17). The ghost and its potential demands introduce the ethical concerns, more specifically, the topic of justice and its depiction in Aeschylus' plays. In *The Persians*, the possibility is put forward that what is *right* and what is *just* may be at odds with each other, to the point of "becoming indistinguishable" (18). This brief incursion into Aeschylus' ethics shares similarities with Agamben's perspective. The latter's "meaning of ethics" reveals itself with the acceptance of the fact "that the authentic and the true are not real predicates of an object perfectly analogous (even if opposed) to the false and the inauthentic", and "ethic begins only […] when the authentic and the proper have no other content than the inauthentic and the improper" (1993, 14). These fine distinctions between just and right (in Kadare's perception of Aeschylus) and authentic and proper (in Agamben's formulation), even if seemingly opposed to unjust and wrong on the one side, and inauthentic and improper on the other, actually suggest a permeability of ethical boundaries, to the point of almost including the opposite. This (un)ethical collapsing of boundaries is best understood in the Balkan context

where, “for thousands of years people have killed each other in blood vengeance”, even more so “in the vicious cycle of Albanian killings”, always “feeding death fresh corpses” (Kadare 2018, 18).

The mythological dimensions of Kadare’s work have been noticed by a number of critics[3]. The Albanian author is intensely aware of the fact that, as Mircea Eliade puts forward, “to know the myths is to learn the secret of the origins of things” and that by the acquisition of “such knowledge, one learns not only how things came into existence but also where to find them and how to make them reappear when they disappear” (1963, 25). Moreover, Kadare’s mastering of myths leads him to the mastering of creation of a “political theology” which “endeavors to adapt irrational cosmologies to rational polities” (Gould 2012, 224). *The Oresteia* holds a significant role in the first essay, since Orestes’ destiny as a blood seeker will anticipate Hamlet’s and erase borders between art and life. His call to vengeance is part and parcel of the quotidian for the Albanians bound by their implacable Kanun. This horrific tale of matricide contains inexplicable points which, Kadare claims, knowledge of the Albanian code can help clarify. For example, the mystery of Oreste’s attempt to justify his crime by showing the “bloody netting that Clytemnestra threw over her husband” (2018, 71) before slaying him resembles specific requirements sanctified by the Kanun. When murder occurs in the Albanian mountains, the victim’s shirt is to be hung from the murderer’s tower, an act which would grant the relatives of the deceased the possibility of interpreting the victim-sent portents “in the color of the drying blood” (71). Clytemnestra, fearing her dead husband’s retribution, carves up the body, to prevent his sending messages to the Earth. The Kanun, Kadare suggests, in its stern imposition of preserving the body’s integrity at all costs, clearly delimitates itself from such practices, considered worthy of the despised Montenegrins who behead enemies, “a practice probably learnt from the Turks or brought from the remote steppes” (73).[4] The Kanun single-handedly solves a cultural quandary; Oreste’s persistent knocking at the door of Atreus provides the readers with yet another instance in which the Kanun is shown as serving as a cultural/social code for deciphering centuries-old literary dilemmas. Kadare explains that Oreste’s actions, read in the Balkan context, do not amount to “an illogical leap” on Aeschylus’ part, but simply resemble those of “an Albanian traveller confidently demanding hospitality” (74).

Kadare repeatedly emphasizes the figure of the *guest*, almost deified by the Albanians (78) and discusses its central place in the Kanun. Different articles elaborate on penalties for breaking the rules of hospitality, such as the proper call for shelter, the ceremonial of inviting the guest inside, his disarming, as well as the obligation of showing hospitality “even though he may be in blood with you” (75). They all have constituted the fundamental rules of behavior for the Balkan (and Albanian) way of life, for millennia. As it plays such an important role in Albanian culture and identity, the Kanun cannot be simply obliterated. Read from within the present theoretical framework, the political and cultural implications of this role suggest that the European integration of Albania can only be achieved, in the presence of all its predicates, regardless of their peculiarities.

Kadare sees the Balkans as both far from Europe and the very cradle of Europeanness; as he claims elsewhere, "for Albania, [Europe] represents itself or everything: it is Albania's natural state" (2012). Albania and Greece share the same void of belonging, since they are devoid of "a larger tribe like the Slavs or the Latins", a state of isolation which forced them to stand alone and applies equally to their languages (2018, 77). Significantly, the essay directs a thinly veiled accusation at the Westerners who, after generously helping themselves to portions of Greek and Albanian culture, conveniently forgot the "point of origin", i.e. "the Balkan Mountains" (84). The tradition of "reporting the crimes and dramas that defile the homes of big families" permeates Balzac, Tolstoy, and Shakespeare's masterpieces, but the flourishing of the stages of Europe demanded the silencing of Balkan theatres, "taken over by wild grass" (85). This first essay ends up with Aeschylus' self-exile from a Greece that seems no longer able to award him the recognition he deserves; nevertheless, the Greece within him, this "fatal bond", between author and place, mind and environment is not only about "fatality and darkness", but also about the "possibility of light, happiness, darkness and resurrection" (93). Aeschylus can be easily read as the alter-ego of Kadare himself, self-exiled from Albania in the 1990s. Alternatively, in an extended, political context, of internecine Balkan struggles behind Albania and Greece, also discussed in the second essay, Aeschylus can signify Albania, while Greece may stand for Europe, locked in a problematic but unavoidable embrace.

EXILE AND THE IRREPARABLE IN "DANTE, THE INEVITABLE"

While the first essay concentrated on the articulation of cultural affinities between Albanians and Greeks, "Dante, the Inevitable" shifts the emphasis towards Albanian and Italian cultural, political and social connections; the catalyst is Dante, in whose *Inferno* Kadare recognizes "a poetic creation that vividly captures the oppressiveness of Albania during communism and during the nineteenth-century Ottoman occupation" (Kokobobo 2018, xi).

There are certain similarities between Kadare's essay, and Agamben's "The Irreparable", the Appendix to *The Coming Community.* In this ontological mini-treatise, Agamben explains this concept, in the following terms: "The Irreparable is neither an essence nor an existence, neither a substance, nor a quality, neither a possibility nor a necessity. It is not properly a modality of being, but it is the being that is always already given in modality, that is its modalities. It is not *thus*, but rather it is *its* thus" (92). Moreover, the Irreparable is the world in its "eternal exposition and facticity" (100). Salzani notes that "exposition and facticity raise the question of redemption as an ontological question" (2012, 220). In Agamben's own words, redemption is not "an event in which what was profane becomes sacred and what was lost is found again", but "the irreparable loss of what is lost, the definitive profanity of what is profane" (1993, 102). The last aphorism of "The Irreparable" states: "At the point you perceive the irreparability of the world, at that point it is transcendent" (106). In this context, in Kadare's second essay, the historical "irreparability" of the Italian conquest of Albania's world is assumed, valorized and transcended, via the acceptance of the invader's culture, represented by Dante Alighieri.

The exilic experience of different men of letters inspires Kadare's assessments of his country's exile from Europe, under the Ottomans and the communists. Kadare refers to Mandelstam's fascination with Dante's Hell, in view of the perceived similarities with the Soviet Hell of his own (2018, 96). Mandelstam's Albanian counterpart is the author and translator Ernest Koliqi; his reflections on his own exile under communism resembled Dante's plight, but also imagined the cultural memory of the Albanians as a palimpsest, engraved by the Romans, Byzantines and Ottomans, which enabled his compatriots' privileged position in grasping the full historical and political implications of Dante's poem (103).

The dark Ottoman history of Albania is briefly but poignantly sketched, in an undeniable Orientalist tone. Not the "tolerant tyrants" of their self-perception, according to Kadare, the Ottomans actually undertook a systematic erasure "of the Balkan way of life, with its languages, ancient memories, churches and rites" (98), and carried on a methodical extermination of the written Albanian language via the massacre of its students and teachers (99). Employing Agamben's coinage again, it can be claimed that the Albanian "linguistic being", under Ottoman rule, was historically trapped between belonging and not belonging to itself (1993, 10).

Keen on recovering their lost identity as part of Europe, in 1914 Albanians import the German prince William of Wied, as their first king. Nevertheless, in spite of this gesture towards the European powers, European armies, "absent for years", "as though making up for lost time, emerged forcefully", with "Frenchmen, Austrians, Greeks, Italians, Serbs, groups of Turkish sympathizers, and, naturally, an Albanian army commanded by the Dutchmen", and managed to reduce Albania to "half her original size" (2018, 100–101). This period of fragmented sovereignty is followed by the 1939 Italian removal of the first Albanian King Zog I and the forced inclusion of Albania in the Empire ruled by Victor Emanuel III, along with Ethiopia. The considerable historical, political and racial snub that Albania suffers is nevertheless offered a surprising cultural compensation in the literary figure of Dante, who now gains the title of national poet and whose portrait is "placed along her icons" (101). Thus, the inescapability of yet another "irreparable" historical conquest is nevertheless balanced by an emergent striving towards cultural redemption. In Agamben's words, "[w]e can have hope only in what has no remedy. That things are thus and thus – this is still in the world. But, that this is irreparable, that this *thus* has no remedy, that we can contemplate it as such – this is the only passage outside the world. (The innermost character of salvation is that we are saved only at the point when we no longer want to be. At this point, there is salvation – but not for us)" (1993, 102).

Kadare emphasizes the prophetic qualities of Dante's work, whose inhabitants of Hell foreshadow the contemporary, massive exilic wave, experienced by Albania, Europe and the world at large. The dead are like the migrants, cut-off from their native land, forever expanding into an entity resembling the endless ancient chorus, constantly lamenting their loss (2018, 106). In this gloomy context, Kadare suggests, Dante's sublimation of his own experience highlights the similarities between art and life, and thus forestalls the substitutability between literary beings and living beings. Agamben defines substitutability as "the most proper to every creature", as "being in any case

in the place of the other" (1993, 24). He points out that in the Talmudic tradition, "there are two places reserved for each person, one in Eden and the other in Gehenna", and that after the final judgement the ones found just "in their land [...] receive double" and the ones found unjust will be destroyed "with a double destruction" (24–25). In the community called Badaliya, "the members took a vow to live substituting themselves for someone else, that is, to be Christians *in the place of the others*"; the secret aim of this community, is to destroy the wall dividing Eden from Gehenna, since "Eden and Gehenna are only the names of this reciprocal substitution" (25). Badaliya thus presents "an unconditioned substitutability, without either representation or possible description – an absolutely unpresentable community" (25). In the present context, the permeable barriers between the Eden of Art and the Gehenna of life suggest unencumbered substitutability, that of the plight of the inhabitants of Dante's Hell, and/or the reality of the (self) exiled communities of today, whose "fragments of stories", "anger", "political curiosity", "thirst for news", "wills and testaments", and "regrets", constructs an unpresentable palimpsest of sorrow, where *The Divine Comedy* cannot be distinguished from "the chronicles of our time" (Kadare 2018, 105).

Kadare further on refers to "the Dante hour", that precise instant of encounter between Dante and "people, governments, epochs, kingdoms, republics, races and different languages" (2018, 112). For Albanians that was the year 1939 when, due to the Italian invasion of Albania, the border with Greece became a Greco-Italian-Albanian border and the Greeks became threatened by Rome from the Albanian city of Butrint, the Trojans' first stop on their way to Italy (113). Thus, ironically, the two Balkan siblings, Greece and Albania, previously united in their political and cultural aspirations are cast as enemies by the inevitability of the historical tide. Kadare, in an apparently self-deprecatory gesture, notices how his compatriots, "known as they were for blood vengeance", grabbed history by the throat, proudly decided to join their fate with that of the people of ancient Troy, and became one of its many present-day "grandchildren" to fight its cause (114). A convenient pretext is offered by Mussolini's decision to exploit the historical and cultural code of the Balkans, via ordering murder, specifically "the murder and betrayal of an Albanian" (114). In the frame of Albanians' honor-culture this particular murder transgresses it specificity and is mythologized as "the first murder in the history of humanity" (115). Agamben's clarification of the adjective "whatever" from *whatever singularity* (1993, 1), as one of utmost significance can be easily understood in the context of the answer given by the Albanian Archbishop retort to a Chinese ambassador. The latter's quantification of death: "The entire population of Albania is as small as the number of people that drown in our rivers every year" is promptly corrected by the former: "Do not forget, your excellency, that these are *Albanian* and not Chinese people" (Kadare 2018, 115, emphasis added).

With communism, Dante's literary Hell turns into a living Hell (112). Simultaneously, the masterpiece also acts as "the only gospel" and "the only conscience left" in the context of imposed atheism, and corrupted ethical values (112). Dante's visionary gifts make him part of a literary family, whose members are united in their aim to depict totalitarian geographies and their stifling grip of the individual. His is

the cultural dwelling that came to generate Kafka's "penal colonies", Mandelstam's "Saturnian rings" and Solzhenitsyn's "gulag archipelago" (124). Within the "endless communist expanse" stretching "from Tirana to Murmansk and from Berlin to Kamchatka" (123) and a community of shared experiences, Albania, in Kadare's vision, is granted the problematic privilege of being the closest enactment of Dante's infernal world, via its "prison cemeteries", incarcerating *ad infinitum* rotting prisoners "whose death had transpired during their sentence", "corpses who had to complete the years left in their sentences on prison grounds" (124). Kadare claims that the Albanians' singular connections with Dante, "should not be seen as an attempt at appropriation" since "to have a unique history with Dante means to volunteer oneself to suffer" (122). However, the author's unambiguously passionate style and tone, the careful selection of moments in Albanian history which mostly allow associations (either of a personal or literary nature) with Dante suggest more a matter of choice, rather than imposition. As Agamben states, "Plotinus had to have this kind of being in mind when, trying to define the freedom and the will of the one, he explained that we cannot say that "it happened to be thus", but only that it "is as it is, without being master of its own being" and that it does not remain below itself, but make use of itself as it is" and that it is not thus by necessity, in the sense that it could not be otherwise, but because "*thus* is best" (1993, 28). Kadare's entire essay detailing Albania's incorporation of Dante's world as a hermeneutic tool for coming to terms with its tumultuous history, as well as its cultural reparation, is "*thus*", "the best".

TO FEUD OR NOT TO FEUD IN "HAMLET, THE DIFFICULT PRINCE"

As David Damrosch points out, "Hamlet, the Difficult Prince" displays themes prominent in "larger-scale world literary studies" such as "center-periphery relations, nationalism and cosmopolitanism, emigration and exile, poetry and politics, translation and betrayal" (2020, 284). Moreover, the third essay constitutes an extension and an elaboration of the first one, in that it places even more emphasis on the Kanun. The aim is to provide a national, Albanian contextualizing of Shakespeare's tragedy, as a means of offering alternative explanations for its appeal. In this context, Kadare exposes the Kanun, the Albanian *whatever singularity* to universal (and personal) scrutiny and accounts for its survival to the present day.

Kadare begins with an evaluation of the adjective "universal", undisputedly the most frequent qualifier for Shakespeare's works, particularly *Hamlet*. As "praise", "universal" sanctifies a comfortable rapport that readers establish with time and space, as guardians of the stability of this "unchanged" character (2018, 129). Nevertheless, on the whole, the essay reads as an attempt to reveal the universalistic tendency of glossing over the multi-layered levels of reception. Paradoxically, preserving a reductionist stance can be counteracted and actualized in the context of Albanian history and culture. Kadare's own position is ambiguous; as a convinced liberal humanist, he acclaims universality as positive, whereas as a patriot interested in promoting the culture of his own country as having a privileged relationship with a masterpiece, he challenges this very quality and sets out to argue for the relevance of alternative, singular readings, that may render universality as not merely obsolete, but as nega-

tive. Thus, Kadare performs a "cosmopolitan reading" of *Hamlet* which, "presupposes a world in which novels travel between places where they are understood differently, because people are different and welcome to their difference" (Appiah 2001, 202) or, in the European context, as "a reading that cares for a Europe of difference wherein citizens constantly negotiate the meaning of a European identity among their other identities" (Dominguez 2015, 40).

Kadare claims that within the specificity of Albanian culture, *Hamlet* can be succinctly read as either a "classic blood feud" or "a crime disguised as revenge" (2018, 130), the latter interpretation inspired by "the murderous rampage" (172) authored by Hamlet, possibly in order to rid himself of his co-conspirators. The obvious value of the second interpretation, keen as it is on focusing on Hamlet as man of action rather than man of thinking is nevertheless overshadowed by Kadare's clear favoring of the first reading, with the Kanun as background. Kadare's assessment was inspired by journalist Cyrus Sulzberger who, in 1938, suggested that the great Elizabethan should have chosen Illyria (ancient Albania) as a setting for his masterpiece (137). This reading argues for an early, international appraisal of the Kanun as hermeneutic modality and, in Kadare's essay, achieves an Albanian appropriation of *Hamlet*, similar to that of Dante's *The Divine Comedy*.

Kadare offers various examples of how the similar avenge-culture core of the Kanun and *Hamlet* alike permeate Albanian history. In King Zog's court there "roamed a boy nephew whose father had been killed by his uncle king" (138); in 1924, Beqir Valteri attempted to assassinate the king, in front of the Parliament, in order to avenge his uncle's blood (165) although the brain behind the assassination attempt was believed to be Fan Noli, chief of the opposition, leader of the Albanian church, and prolific translator of Shakespeare's work (183). More recently, in 1999, *Hamlet* was the first play to be put on stage in Pristina following the liberation from Milosevic's Serbian rule; therefore, it became "a synecdoche for the theatrics of the Balkan conflict during the last year of the millennium" (158). In that particularly charged historical context, Kadare emphasizes, every aspect of the play was scrutinized by "uncomfortable Serbs", "gloomy Albanians", and the international envoys alert to the possibility of a call for national revenge against the ethnic cleansing (139).

As previously stated, the indestructible link between Shakespeare's masterpiece and its actualization in Albanian ancient and contemporary history is the obligation to exact revenge, sanctified by either the ghost or the implacability of the Albanian Kanun, "a code more ruthless than the ghost" (159). Strictly politically speaking, Kadare is critical of the double standards he perceives as employed by the international community, in their assessment of the Kanun. This "identifying Albanian trait", which competed with "the state, its weight and authority not based on the police, courts, or prison but rather on public opinion", which sought "to either defeat the government or replace it altogether" (161) was suspended in communism but resurrected after its collapse. Nowadays it is part and parcel of "any discussion about the future of Albania", and according to Kadare, stands as an impediment to EU accession, whereas similar "blood codes from Corsica, Sardinia and Sicily" due to their belonging to "two founding European countries" operate "without a fuss" (161).

To counteract the international critical view on the Kanun, Kadare mentions how its emphasis on the guest as sacred, helped protect Jews during the World War II, rendering Albania the only European country with a larger Jewish population at the end of the war than at the beginning (161).

Kadare's personal attitude regarding the Kanun is ambivalent; on the one hand, he admits that it contained, preserved and safeguarded a sense of identity; on the other, it displaced some of those who should have been bound by it. They became the exceptions, "the failed blood-seekers", and came to embody another type of potentiality, that of the non-act, i.e. the individuals reluctant to conform, and act on the blood-feuds. As Agamben explains, the Aristotelian "'potentiality to not-be' (*dynamis me einai*) or also impotence (*adynamia*)" has various interpretations related to "whatever being" (1993, 35). On the one hand, "whatever being always has a potential character", but it also confirms "that it is not capable of only this or that specific act"; "it is not simply incapable, lacking in power", nor is it "indifferently capable of everything, all-powerful: The being that is properly whatever is able to not-be; it is capable of its own impotence" (35). In the context of the Albanian Kanun, the *gjaks*, the blood-seekers, are already, by definition "a people within a people", belonging to an "elite", "like members of a sect, with their distinguishing mark of death, a black armband sewn in their sleeves" (Kadare 2018, 163). Their visibility, counteracted by the shadowy life of those waiting for the hit, is but a halt, a marker of the threshold between life and death, to be transgressed as soon as they get de-Hamletized after performing their duty to kill (163). But, apart from those marked for death in its most literal sense, who do not challenge the implacability of the Kanun, there is yet another category; those refracted images of Prince Hamlet's early hesitations, who may be described as those "whatever beings", "capable of their own impotence" (Agamben 1993, 35). Towards the end of the essay, Kadare introduces an uncanny group of people, roaming the streets of Tirana "in northern highlander attire", in 1954, "after ten years of communism" (2018, 205). These "pale wanderers", holding "an axe in their hands", were "men with cold eyes", and cold cries, "as though they came not from a human throat or language" (205). Officially, they are wood-cutters for the capital's families, actually they are "deleted from all population registers of the world, by the Kanun", due to their reluctance to take part in the blood feud. Moreover, their desertion authored the "blood losers", the "population of dead relatives" left behind, "different from the ordinary dead", "lost souls" not of their making, but as a consequence of their relatives' actualized potentiality to not kill. The failed avengers had their manhood obliterated, situated outside language, through the interdiction to answer the usual formula "Are you a man?" with anything but silence (205).

In her study on the ethics of witnessing, Kelly Oliver argues that "response-ability" should constitute the core of any account of witnessing, as it underlines the vital dependency of the subject on the dynamic of address and response that is, bearing witness in order to emerge and survive (2001). Kadare's Kanun insiders' interdiction to answer the simplest (but fundamental) questions about themselves, clearly suggests another impossibility, that of testifying to their plight. Their precarious placement between the dead and the living also calls to mind the figure of the Muselmann,

as rendered by Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999b). There, Agamben expands Levi's paradox, according to which the Muselmann, precisely because he cannot speak, is the only authentic witness of the camps. Notwithstanding the widely different contexts – the Kanun, albeit its problematic aspects related to the obligation of perpetuating the blood feuds, at the risk of becoming a non-being is not the equivalent of Auschwitz – the ethical aporia of testimony is what the Albanian blood-seeker and the Muselmann unquestionably share.

CONCLUSION

In the context of a still-ongoing pandemic, the future of Europe and the world at large leave ample room for speculation. The collision between political determinations and civic and cultural affiliations will possibly take center stage for the conceivable future. In an age like ours, torn between the forgotten lessons of the past and the "murky" (Kadare's term) promises of the future, perhaps an eternal return to the *whatever singularities* of politics, ethics and culture may provide us with hope and a renewed capacity for endurance. We are at a "threshold" of a new era; in Agamben's words, we are contemplating the "outside", which is not "another space that resides beyond a determinate space", but "the passage, the exteriority that gives it access […] its *eidos*". If we are to re-learn to imagine ourselves as significant, as important, as *whatever singularities*, we need to experience the state "of being-*within* an *outside*" so as to be able to collect the "*ek-stasis*" as the "gift that singularities gather from the empty hands of humanity" (Agamben 1993, 69).

NOTES

[1] See, for example Enis Sulstarova's (2012) comprehensive analysis of Kadare's liberal use of the tropes borrowed from the European Orientalist tradition (in his fiction produced during communism and post-communism times), and his consequent portrayal of the Turks as the Oriental other of the Albanian nation. On a different note, Marinus Ossewaarde (2015) discusses Kadare's particular idea of Europe stemming from Homeric roots and his claim that literature is the authentic guarantor of European values and not the polis or ideology.

[2] For some of the (many) sociological studies on the Kanun, see Mirjona Sadıku 2014, Arben Cara and Mimoza Margjeka 2015, and Arjana Lugaj 2018.

[3] See Merxhan Avdyli 2019, Robert Elsie 2005, and Peter Morgan 2010.

[4] For an excellent article on Kadare's Orientalist tendencies, see Adrian Brisku 2006.

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Myth, history and literature: Reading Ismail Kadare's "Essays on World Literature" through Giorgio Agamben's "The Coming Community"

Kadare. Literature. Myth. History. "Whatever sinqularities."

The work of Albania's best-known writer, Ismail Kadare, is focused on his native country's culture, history and traditions, but has been paralleled by his equal concern with world literature. This has provided him not only with a cultural framework for comparison and analysis, but also with an effective means to render historical processes throughout artistic expression. The collection translated into English as *Essays on World Literature: Aeschylus, Dante, Shakespeare* (2018) mediates the readers' imaginary voyage to ancient Greece, Renaissance Italy, Elizabethan England and communist Albania. Using a theoretical approach inspired by *The Coming Community* (1993) by philosopher Giorgio Agamben (with whom Kadare received the 2018 Nonino Prize), this article discusses Kadare's essays focusing on Albania's European identity, supported by the inextricable links between myth, literature and history.

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