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Ismail Kadare's Tragic *Dragomans*: Translators as Mediators

The present study aims to scrutinise the construction of a particular image of the Albanian author Ismail Kadare (1936-) in the English-speaking literary world, in particular zooming in on Kadare's self-profiled image in the context of the inaugural Man Booker International (MBI) Prize (2005). Particular attention will be paid to Kadare's discourse surrounding the award and his choice to reward David Bellos, one of his translators into English who worked indirectly from the French intermediary translations. Via the MBI Prize, Kadare distinctively positioned himself towards translation and literature: by choosing Bellos as co-recipient of the prize, he consequently recognised indirect translation as legitimate for consecration. Yet, the indirectness of the English translations of Kadare's texts in their reception has often been pinpointed as an issue, whereas the writer refrained from commenting upon translation at all in his acceptance speech. Why is that? This phenomenon will be illuminated by a close reading of Kadare's fictional representation of translation and translators in a selection of fictional and non-fictional literary works available in the French-speaking literary field to better understand such a position. In order to describe and envisage these dissimilar, yet complementary, objects of study, the recent discussions in discourse analysis on the notions of *posture* and *ethos* will be mobilised. This investigation will arguably elicit the ways in which the comparative study of interconnections between his *posture* during the MBI Prize and previous *ethos* as constructed in the selected literary works, unveil Kadare's own mediation strategy towards his reception in English – namely, by capitalising on the triangulation generated from indirect translation.

Keywords: world literature; Albanian literature; indirect translation; consecration; discourse analysis

Introduction

In 2005 the first Man Booker International Prize (henceforth MBI Prize) was awarded to Albanian writer Ismail Kadare. This prize was created as a response to “criticisms that the Booker Prize is only open to British and Commonwealth authors.”¹ It awarded £60,000 biannually to a living author of any nationality for her/his whole body of works published in English or available in English translation. This configuration lasted from 2005 until 2015 to celebrate “quality fiction from all over the world.”² Interestingly, the award enabled Kadare to select a translator of his own works as the recipient of a £15,000 sum to celebrate “the vital work of translators.”³ Unsurprisingly, Kadare chose literary translator David Bellos as co-recipient of the prize. From 2016 onwards, the prize evolved into a £50,000 sum split equally between writer and translator.

This study zooms in on this moment of recognition in the English-speaking literary field and aims to provide insight into how the prize has shaped Kadare’s international *posture*. Theoretical and pragmatic discussions on the concept of *ethos* and *posture* bring insightful tools for the study of the ways in which a singular image of Kadare is constructed through the MBI Prize and its related ‘traces’. In an interview Jérôme Meizoz defines the concept of *posture* as the presentation of the ‘self’ and the construction of a singular author figure – a mask or *persona*⁴ – through the linguistic *ethos* and the public behaviours on a given literary scene.⁵ The concept of *posture* therefore combines a rhetorical dimension with an ‘actional’ dimension. Little research has been carried out on Kadare’s international *posture*; the focus has so far been on his works and his biography. This article aims to initiate the study of Kadare’s international *posture*, taking the MBI Prize as a point of departure. It further wishes to open the discussion on the agency, or lack

¹ Unknown, “Albanian Wins First World Booker”.

² Unknown, “Albanian Wins First World Booker”.

³ Unknown, “Booker Prize to Award Translators”.

⁴ Meizoz and Martens, “La fabrique d’une notion”, 203.

⁵ Meizoz, *La Fabrique des singularités*, 18; Meizoz, “Ce que l’on fait dire au silence”, 2.

thereof, of writers from 'small literatures' on their own reception within the centre of the world literary field.⁶

The first section lays the emphasis on Kadare's discourse surrounding the MBI award and his choice of the translator to be awarded alongside his body of works translated into English. The second half of this article casts a comparative look at a selection of works untranslated into English where Kadare expressed a certain view on translation. This analysis will shed light on the writer's particular conceptualisation of translation in these works, in order to interpret his positioning towards translation around the MBI Prize. Particular attention will be paid to the fictionalisation of translators-interpreters and translation in *Le Grand hiver/L'Hiver de la grande solitude* (henceforth *L'Hiver*),⁷ a novel that places a translator-interpreter at the centre of the plot, and *Les Quatre interprètes* (henceforth referred to as *Les Quatre*), a non-fiction piece that responds to *L'Hiver*.⁸ This two-fold analysis will arguably uncover the connivances that exist between Kadare's reception as a world literary writer and his own vision of world literature. It will be demonstrated that consistent interconnections are established between his *posture* shaped through the MBI Prize and previous *ethes* constructed in the chosen literary works. His conceptualisation of translation and translators-interpreters in these works clarifies his choice of Bellos,

⁶ Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*; Chitnis, Stougaard-Nielsen, Atkin, and Milutinović, *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*.

⁷ Kadare, *Le Grand hiver*; Kadare, *L'Hiver de la grande solitude*; Kadare and Fernández Recatalà, *Les Quatre interprètes*.

Le Grand hiver is reportedly the adapted and extended version of *L'Hiver de la grande solitude* which was published after the first version was forbidden from being reprinted by the Albanian communist state. Bruno Clément has argued that the order might be reversed: *Le Grand hiver* contains more passages that do not appear in *L'Hiver de la grande solitude*. The preface to the Albanian edition highlights this conundrum by mentioning the fact that the version translated by Fayard (*Le Grand hiver* in 1978) returns to the uncensored original text. For this reason, *Le Grand hiver* has been used as the main reference text in the present article, although the analysis is informed by both editions. It is worth mentioning that the French translations of the texts have been used (instead of the Albanian originals) since *Les Quatre interprètes* responds to the French versions. Clément, "Réécrire", 237-257; Kadare, *Vepra*, 15.

⁸ These books have not been translated into English.

as well as his silence towards indirect translation issues raised in his reception. It confirms not so much his disinterest in these issues, as much as it does his strategic use and capitalisation on the triangulation generated by indirect translation.

Challenging the hyper-centre of world literature

The international reception of Albanian writer Ismail Kadare and his literary works has not been consistent. Unlike his success in French translation (observable in the numerous translations and editions of his works by Fayard), the reception of Kadare's literary works in English translation has encountered widespread resistance in the Anglophone literary field. There are multiple causes for the problematic circulation and reception in English, but one of them is striking: there has always been a considerable lack of literary translators from Albanian into English. Nevertheless, Anglophone publishers have bypassed this obstacle by relying considerably on the French translations of Kadare's works as intermediary source texts. To this date, nearly half of the translations available in English are indirect translations, defined here as translations of translations,⁹ performed from the French translations. The difficulties surrounding the translation of his texts into English have not significantly hindered Kadare's legitimation and recognition in institutions of world literature. Judge of the MBI Prize, John Carey qualified Kadare as "a universal writer in the tradition of storytelling that goes back to Homer."¹⁰ In 2020 the writer obtained the Neustadt International Prize for literature – a prize sponsored by the University of Oklahoma, managed by the literary journal *World Literature Today* and often referred to as a lead-up to the Nobel Prize. This award confirms the general tendency of the writer's growing international consecration as world literary author.

Interestingly, the use of the "world literature" label has not been restricted to Kadare's reception. The author has frequently formulated his own conceptualisation of world literature and used it in his own international self-profiling. Reindert Dhondt and Beatrijs Vanacker

⁹ Gambier, "La retraduction, retour et détour", 413; Gambier, "Working with Relay", 57.

¹⁰ Unknown, "Albanian Wins First World Booker".

point to how an author's *ethos* is anchored in the collective imaginary of a given culture, which the author either confirms or transgresses.¹¹ This idea echoes Meizoz's concept of a "repertoire" of *postures*. Kadare has frequently appropriated Goethean ideas in the 'repertoire' of already-existing definitions of world literature in his own discourse. World literature, in his view, is a "kingdom" where "his masters" are Shakespeare, Dante, and Cervantes:

Mon royaume était ailleurs. Mes chefs se nommaient Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantès. Mes ministres, les Tragiques grecs, Goethe, Rimbaud, Pouchkine, Kafka, Borges. C'est à eux que je rendais des comptes, non à cet État ridicule [BH: Communist Albania], en tout risible sauf dans le crime. Il aurait beau fouiller ma maison comme il le fit en octobre 1990 en confisquant tous mes manuscrits, jamais il ne pourrait accéder à mon "laboratoire" afin d'y briser, ou, pis encore, d'y altérer mes instruments de créateur.¹²

This literary "kingdom," which reminds us of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*, is viewed by the writer as an actualisation of anti-totalitarianism in itself. In his acceptance speech to the MBI Prize, Kadare reiterates his definition of world literature as anti-totalitarian tool.¹³ He affiliates his own production to a 'universal' literary "kingdom" similar to the one he had previously formulated, to which he bears a "fascination as to a religion"¹⁴ triggered by "the castle of Macbeth, Thane of Glamis and Cawdor,"¹⁵ and in which canonical Western authors govern. Literature and its themes become a bridge across geographical distance and hence universal, as per the motif of the castle which, he argues, "[a]ll regimes

¹¹ Dhondt and Vanacker, "Ethos", 8.

¹² Ismail Kadare cited in Velo, *La Disparition des "Pachas rouges"*, 174.

¹³ What remains nowadays from the 2005 MBI Prize ceremony is almost entirely enclosed within the four-page acceptance speech that David Bellos transcribed, translated, and subsequently published as an afterword to the Canongate edition of *Agamemnon's Daughter* (2007) (Kadare, *Agamemnon's Daughter*).

¹⁴ Kadare, *Agamemnon's Daughter*, 228.

The afterword contains no page numbers. The page numbering has been continued for the sake of referencing.

¹⁵ *Agamemnon's Daughter*, 230.

had used [...] as a prison.”¹⁶ The writer subsequently views his own position as that of a “citizen of another realm, the realm of literature” where “[i]ts leaders – Homer, Shakespeare, Dante, Kafka – became his true masters.”¹⁷ Kadare confirms the Goethean definition of world literature in Western literary history by displaying an *ethos* of erudition about, and proximity and affiliation to, the Western world republic of letters (which he deems universal).

Not only does Kadare consider literature as ‘universal’ and his works as affiliated to the canons of European literature, but his conceptualisation also appears to correspond to the frames in which he is received and consecrated internationally. Nevertheless, the international circulation and reception of his literary works depend on their availability in translation. Yet, translation is absent from his conceptualisation of world literature. At the end of his acceptance speech, Kadare points out that “that signal [literature as a sign of life in communist Albania], broadcast by means of literature and so nobly picked up by you [...] is what has made the unthinkable [obtaining the MBI Prize] possible.”¹⁸ Kadare omits the means that made the “unthinkable” realisable at all, namely translation.¹⁹

Looking for his views on translation elsewhere does not deliver the expected results. Other well-known authors writing in ‘minor languages’ (understood here as languages from the literary peripheries in world literature) and enjoying an international circulation and reception in translation into ‘major languages’ such as French or English have shown visible concern as regards the perceived quality and fidelity of the translations of their own literary texts. Some writers have sometimes openly interfered in the translation process (see, for instance, Milan Kundera’s control of, and discomfort with, his own translations, now a famous anecdote in translation studies).²⁰ Kadare’s comments on

¹⁶ *Agamemnon’s Daughter*, 227.

¹⁷ *Agamemnon’s Daughter*, 232.

¹⁸ *Agamemnon’s Daughter*, 232.

¹⁹ The recording of Kadare’s MBI Prize acceptance speech was requested for the present article. However, no such recording exists according to communication officers of the MBI Prize.

²⁰ Margala, “The Unbearable Torment of Translation”, 30-42.

the translation of his texts, on the contrary, are scarce and scattered; the few existing remarks are neutral and elusive. The indirectness of the translation of his works into English does not seem to compel him the least. David Bellos hints at the author's relative open-mindedness as regards the translation of his texts into French: "Yes, he said, I do change the Albanian when I feel that the French is better. He was not at all worried about being translated from his French translations; in fact, he said, he really preferred it that way."²¹ "[O]ne of the reasons why," Bellos explains, is the Albanian regime's refusal to join the copyright convention until 1994.²² It has therefore been easier for Kadare to "trade the French versions" (copyrighted by Fayard or Albin Michel for the first editions).²³ Moreover, Bellos mentions Kadare's alleged admiration of Vroni's "fluid, spare, slightly old-fashioned... and not quite native" French, with "a poetry of its own."²⁴ He goes further by arguing that Kadare "could hardly be more different in his attitude to linguistic particularity than (for example) Milan Kundera."²⁵

Nevertheless, one stumbling point in his reception in English translation is the indirectness of his works' English translations. In a 2005 review Murray Bail notes that "[a]lthough twice translated (from Albanian and French), the tone is consistent, a tone in casual harmony with the whole."²⁶ The first word is important here: "although" denotes concession. What this means is that indirect translation, despite its supposed inherent feature of increased distance between source and target texts, managed to defy the odds and keep the invariable "harmony." The journal of the *Historical Novel Society* tackled the issue head-on as well:

Another question that has generated lively debate focuses on the problem of judging a book in translation. This is especially true in Kadare's case, because few of his works have been translated directly from Albanian. Most have been

²¹ Bellos, "The Englishing of Ismail Kadare".

²² "The Englishing of Ismail Kadare."

²³ "The Englishing of Ismail Kadare."

²⁴ "The Englishing of Ismail Kadare."

²⁵ "The Englishing of Ismail Kadare."

²⁶ Bail, "Continental Shift".

translated from French and are therefore “twice-removed” from the original text. Translation is a complex art, an imperfect process: Umberto Eco and others have drawn attention to the Italian pun on “tradurre/tradire” (to translate/to betray), which raises the problem of the translator’s loyalty to the original. In Kadare’s case, the addition of another layer of language, a “retranslation,” adds yet another filter.²⁷

This passage discloses similar concerns: indirectness allegedly increases the risk of disloyalty to the source text by adding yet another “filter.”

Since the MBI Prize rewards literature precisely *in* translation, one expects that the writer addresses these questions in his reception. Yet, not only does he refrain from engaging with issues of indirectness raised in his Anglophone reception, but he also decides to choose Bellos, indirect translator of his works from French into English, as co-recipient of the MBI Prize. It is worth mentioning that by 2005, ten different translators had been involved in the translation of his works into English. Five of them worked directly from the Albanian originals (Ali Cungu, Pavli Qesku, Arshi Pipa, John Hodgson, and Peter Constantine) and five of them based their translations on the French intermediary translations (Derek Coltman, David Bellos, Jon Rothschild, Barbary Bray, and Emile Capouya) – a considerable number of translators to choose from. Be it as it may, Bellos stands out as the most successful translator until 2005: he performed three translations, which were reedited and reprinted sixteen times. Kadare chose *de facto* the most visible translator on the Anglophone literary market. But is this the sole reason for his choice?

His choice certainly challenges and transgresses the *doxa* surrounding indirect translation in the western cultural world. Attitudes towards indirect translation have traditionally been precautions, at best, and more often negative, despite its having been a widespread practice throughout centuries.²⁸ As the aforementioned reviews on Kadare’s indirect translations show, the increased distance imposed between the source text and the target text is often pinpointed and criticised, as relying

²⁷ Byatt, “Judging a Book in Translation”.

²⁸ Assis Rosa, Pięta, and Maia, “Theoretical, Methodological and Terminological Issues”, 113.

on a so-called 'relay translation' allegedly inhibits the transmission of an (or many) invariant(s).²⁹ In Lawrence Venuti's terms, the "instrumental model" prevails in discussions on translation.³⁰ Therefore, handing out the MBI award to an indirect translator is at odds with the traditional value that has been ascribed to indirect translation. In fact, one can go as far as to argue that choosing Bellos implicitly acknowledges the legitimacy of indirect translation in the hyper-centres of the world literary landscape. Kadare, by openly rewarding this type of translation, builds his *posture* as an author who disregards the prevailing rhetoric of 'gain and loss' regarding translation.

Emily Wittman refers to the politico-historical reason that might account for this positioning towards indirect translation.³¹ It is true that in choosing French as an intermediary language, Kadare manages to bypass the "frequently expurgated and mutilated Albanian originals in favor of the French editions revised and approved by Kadare himself,"³² although this hypothesis invites further research. However, this does not explain the absence of comments on indirect translation. Wittman foregrounds a more promising line of enquiry for the case under study. She indicates the possibility of interpreting Kadare's choice as a way of acknowledging Bellos' positive mediation in the English-speaking world.³³

For his first consecration ceremony in the hyper-centre of the world literary field, the author moves beyond concerns of linguistic accuracy and fidelity that have permeated the discourse on indirect translation. If Kadare transgresses the pre-existing collective imaginary towards indirect translation without commentary, then which one does he confirm or develop by handing the complementary prize to Bellos? This

²⁹ Dollerup, "Relay and Support Translations", 23. Dollerup's arguments are deconstructed by Silvia Kadiu in her article that contrastively and comparatively analyses David Bellos' translation of *The File on H*. Kadiu empirically challenges the hypothesis that the mediating language, here French, consistently accounts for the shifts present in the English version of David Bellos. Kadiu, "David Bellos' Indirect Translation", 1-24.

³⁰ Venuti, *Contra Instrumentalism*.

³¹ Wittman, "An Award Heard Around the World?"

³² "An Award Heard Around the World?"

³³ "An Award Heard Around the World?"

question leads to another one: How does he envisage translation, if not primarily within the “instrumental model”, and the role of translators, if not (only) as wordsmiths ensuring the safe transmission of an ‘invariant’?

Representations of translation and translators-interpreters

Kadare wrote *L’Hiver* (published in 1972 in Albania) based on archives of the minutes of the Moscow conference that led to the diplomatic break between the USSR and Albania in 1961 and those of a meeting with Agim Popa, one of the translators present.³⁴ The novel chronicles the day-to-day life of a multitude of characters, ranging from a street sweeper to office workers in Tirana in 1961. It is an epic-imprinted novel with a nationalist touch that celebrates Albania’s (and dictator Enver Hoxha’s) ‘bravery’ of challenging the ‘predatory’ USSR. Alongside these heavily engaged political and cultural themes, the novel also stages intricate love and family stories as the characters witness the diplomatic break. Within this large panorama of bustling life in a complex political and social configuration, the novel focuses on the particular storyline surrounding the main character, Besnik Struga.

In their discussion of the notion of “prior *ethos*” (“*éthos préalable*”), Dhondt and Vanacker indicate that the reputation of an author (established upon their discourse and behaviour anterior to the discourse) plays a crucial role on the *ethos* under study.³⁵ Meizoz similarly suggests that studying an author’s particular *posture* presupposes taking into account previous *postures* that weigh on the studied one and describing the consistencies and evolutions across time.³⁶ In *L’Hiver* and *Les Quatre*, Kadare turned towards issues of translation several years before the first MBI Prize. This positioning lets us read into Kadare’s apparent lack of concern about potential negative reception to rewarding Bellos and, consequently, his activity as indirect translator.

³⁴ To avoid backlash from the authorities, Kadare used Albania’s communist dictator Enver Hoxha’s exact words. A controversy emerged in the international reception of this work, as attention was called to Kadare’s positive and heroic depiction of Hoxha. Eissen, “L’Albanie et les trois Romes”, 66.

³⁵ Dhont and Vanacker, “*Ethos*”, 3.

³⁶ Meizoz and Martens, “La fabrique d’une notion”, 207.

However, examining the author's *ethos* in the study of *L'Hiver* imposes its limits. Meizoz sounds a note of caution regarding the analysis of an author's *ethos* in works of fiction, since it often relies on complex mediations, such as through delegated characters. Nevertheless, it is possible to point to the values illustrated by the *postural* choices of the author.³⁷ There are two distinct cases where the notion of *ethos* is more easily deployed: (1) when the author comments on his work of fiction explicitly, and (2) when the line between the author and (one of) his characters is blurred. The last option implies that the notion of *ethos* is operative when a direct link can be established between a character and the author through autobiographical correspondence. The first case, however, better enables one to approach *L'Hiver*. Studying an aspect of Kadare's *posture* through the *ethos* enclosed within values in *L'Hiver* is facilitated by the fact that Kadare and Denis Fernández Recatalà have published in *Les Quatre* an essay commenting on *L'Hiver*. Nevertheless, David Martens considers this approach as restrictive and insufficient.³⁸ His hesitant notion of "value poetics" points to a useful complementation of the concept of *ethos*. Values emerge when reading fictional narratives; these values, in turn, inform the author's *posture*. In short, the "poetics of value" governing the conceptualisation of translation and translator-interpreter in *L'Hiver* are supported and informed by the *ethos* established in *Les Quatre*.

In *L'Hiver*, Besnik endorses the role of translator-interpreter between the Albanians and the Russian-speaking interlocutors during the diplomatic break. Although he is not a professional translator or interpreter, he is chosen to fulfil these roles because he has mastered Russian and Albanian, comes from an ideologically reliable family, and claims to be a strong believer in communist ideals himself.³⁹ The novel positions this ideal profile as a cardinal mediator who is entrusted with considerable power and responsibility, as per Dirk Delabastita and Rainier Grutman's hypothesis of the power of fictional translators:

³⁷ Saint-Amand and Vrydaghs, "Retour sur la posture".

³⁸ Meizoz and Martens, "La fabrique d'une notion", 210.

³⁹ Kadare, *L'Hiver*, 502.

Albania's future weighs on Besnik's shoulders.⁴⁰ In the novel, the character of the translator-interpreter sheds his traditional invisibility for a grander role in shaping historical events.

The centralised translator-interpreter is further depicted as a complex and polyvalent character. He is entrusted with much more than just the technical task of decoding and encoding linguistic data from a source language to a target language. Alongside his newly acquired task as a translator, Besnik is a journalist whose talents come to fruition in Moscow. He is depicted as a mediator who experiences the historical events himself and identifies with the Albanian camp in this dissension.⁴¹ He is primarily a non-neutral witness to the events that unfold in Moscow, to which the novel gives access chiefly through his perspective, experience, and perception. Character depiction and focalisation techniques convey his complex array of skills and bring depth and subjectivity to the character.

The process of translation itself is also subject to complexification. Translation is less depicted as a purely linguistic transaction, requiring thorough technical precision and professionalism, than a form of political, cultural and linguistic mediation. However, despite the visible lack of concern for linguistic accuracy and the Albanian delegation's (almost blind) confidence in Besnik's skills,⁴² the translator-interpreter cannot repress a fear of breaching the principle of fidelity. The aforementioned "instrumental model" colonises Besnik's thoughts. When translating between the Albanians and Khrushchev, he mistranslates and the latter notices his mistake.⁴³ Besnik subsequently experiences a sudden surge of anxiety triggered by social pressure:

Mais maintenant que signifiaient leurs regards? Pouvaient-ils vraiment penser qu'il devenait la cause de leur rupture définitive? Tout se précipitait. Tout

⁴⁰ Delabastita and Grutman put forward the hypothesis that (in fiction) "the translator's power can be assessed in terms of two variables: the importance of the message that is to be communicated, and the distance between the cultures which enter into communication via the translator" (Delabastita and Grutman, "Introduction", 19).

⁴¹ Kadare, *L'Hiver*, 140.

⁴² *L'Hiver*, 171.

⁴³ *L'Hiver*, 168.

semblait absurde. Ils pouvaient se mettre à consulter les dictionnaires, les traités linguistiques, les encyclopédies, fouiller les grammaires historiques, les papyrus, puis se mettre à crier “erreur!” “erreur!”. Enfin, nous avons découvert le défaut de la machine. La cause des désaccords. L’obstacle. Cet homme est à l’origine de la discorde. Cet homme ne traduit pas bien Eschyle. Ce traducteur est un traître.⁴⁴

It is true that this passage highlights Besnik’s concern of having turned into a *traduttore traditore*, in accordance with the Russians’ pejorative opinion regarding translators and interpreters in the narrative,⁴⁵ which would haunt him long after in the form of somatic effects.⁴⁶ Yet, its satirical style undermines, to the point of showing the irrelevance and absurdity of, these linguistic issues in historically and politically important times. In fact, the novel reveals how little difference Besnik’s mistake has made on the outcome of the discussions between Hoxha and Khrushchev. Communication between them was doomed to fail for different reasons, hence the Albanian politicians’ lack of negative reaction to that mistranslation.⁴⁷

Although this linguistic slip has little impact on the wider political events at play, it has reached another layer of importance in the collective imagination of the Albanians: the narrative shifts linguistic concerns from the ‘real world’ to the imaginary one. After his comeback to Tirana, rumours abound across the city concerning the mistranslation of ‘the translator’, conceived of as an unidentified protagonist, rather than specifically referring to Besnik. Towards the end of the novel, Besnik resumes his work as a journalist and is given the task of compiling a report on letters sent by readers. When leafing through the stack of letters, he discovers epic poems and ballads that build on the current political situation. He observes how the events are moulded and mystified into tragic stories and how history is mediated through literature in the collective consciousness. In these epic poems, he is transformed into the abstracted epic figure of the translator-interpreter, fictionalised in the tragic encounters between ‘glorious Albania’

⁴⁴ *L’Hiver*, 170.

⁴⁵ *L’Hiver*, 149.

⁴⁶ *L’Hiver*, 216, 286, 335, 415, 192, 392.

⁴⁷ *L’Hiver*, 171.

and the ‘predatory USSR’. Besnik gradually sheds his guilt over his mistranslation to admire the poetical substance of what he represents in collective memory. His linguistic ‘mistake’, in other words, belongs in the world of imagination. This distance installed between Besnik and the unfortunate events via poetry reduces his feeling of guilt and acts as a “narcotic,” suddenly soothing the somatic symptoms: “Il [Besnik] était encore sous l’emprise des ballades, comme sous l’effet d’un narcotique [...]”⁴⁸ In other words, debates on linguistic accuracy gain relevance only in the fictionalisation of historical events.

This shift shines the spotlight back on the translator-interpreter. By bringing psychological depth to this character, the narrative challenges the invisibility that is traditionally associated with the figure of the translator.⁴⁹ Having access to Besnik’s intimacy and feelings through, amongst others, this internal focalisation enables the reader to understand how the diplomatic break and his role therein have deeply altered his personal life. Further emphasised by the rainy and chilly atmosphere, the diplomatic freeze goes as far as to overwhelm the main character’s daily routine, such as a regular welcome meal with his family: “Les assiettes, les cuillères, et sa plus belle combinaison qu’elle [Zana] avait mise pour lui, tout devint d’un froid glacial.”⁵⁰ As Eissen argues, “Besnik’s unconscious [...] is a form of historical memory” and the cold experienced during the historical events infiltrates him profoundly.⁵¹ The degradation of Besnik’s mental health, as the cold is setting in, unveils his internal struggle between the political and the personal. The “tragedy of Moscow” leads to a personal “tragedy,” namely his separation from his fiancée.⁵² In short, Besnik absorbs the political and historical cold: “C’était l’histoire elle-même. Son corps encore tiède, non embaumé, était là, autour de lui, chair vive délivrée de sa coquille, pâte déversée généreusement dans les rues et les places [...]. Je vis un moment de vérité [...]. Il l’avait perdue [Zana].”⁵³ The

⁴⁸ Kadare, *L’Hiver*, 558.

⁴⁹ Simeoni, “Le traducteur, personnage de fiction”, 25.

⁵⁰ Kadare, *L’Hiver*, 201.

⁵¹ Eissen, “L’Albanie et les trois Romes”, 61 (my translation).

⁵² Kadare, *L’Hiver*, 313 (my translation).

⁵³ *L’Hiver*, 571.

translator-interpreter is *part* of this context, interacts with it and is transformed by it, as the excerpt demonstrates. The depiction of Besnik brings humanisation, complexity, and a tragic touch to the figure of the translator-interpreter, whose destiny has been shaken by his role played in the political events. It slides the attention of the reader from matters of linguistic accuracy in translation to the translator and his part in “*l’histoire*.”

In *Les Quatre*, Ismail Kadare and Denis Fernández Recatalà investigate the biographies of the three translators (and a fourth mysterious one, according to Kadare) who have facilitated the communication between Albanians and the USSR delegation in Moscow in 1961 and on whom the character of Besnik Struga is based. The non-fiction work’s primary function is to reinforce and complement the historical dimension and truthfulness of *L’Hiver*. It serves as a prior *ethos* in that it further unveils and makes explicit Kadare’s engagement with and stance towards translators-interpreters and translation within these historical events. *Les Quatre* also encapsulates comments on translation, via chapters that are explicitly signed by the author at the beginning and at the end of the book. These chapters are in agreement with the values ascribed to the translator-interpreter and translation in *L’Hiver*. These comments directly shape Kadare’s *ethos* by reaffirming in his own name the conceptualisation expressed in *L’Hiver*.

The author starts the book by returning to Faik Konica’s essay on translation and exposing his thesis that “the first words of literature” (that is, the translation of the first verses of the *Iliad* in several languages according to Konica) are imbued with “approximations.”⁵⁴ Instead of interpreting this as an affirmation of the impossibility of translation, Kadare considers this as the onset of the exact opposite: “Bref, la traduction infère la faute et l’interprète postule le sacrilège. On pourrait conclure à l’impossibilité de traduire. Je pense l’inverse: l’Histoire de l’Humanité est celle de la traduction.”⁵⁵ In other words, untranslatability does not exist and “translating is part of our condition.”⁵⁶ Translation is

⁵⁴ Kadare and Fernández Recatalà, *Les Quatre*, 12 (my translation).

⁵⁵ *Les Quatre*, 12.

⁵⁶ *Les Quatre*, 13 (my translation).

also tragic: its very essence implies inevitability as well as danger for the translator-interpreter. In his view, concerns of infidelity and, in the worst case, treason are irrelevant since translation can never result in pure and simple equivalence.⁵⁷ The paradoxical combination of impossibility and inevitability emerges in his approach to indirect translation during the Moscow conference. In such a big congregation of people mastering different languages – a true microcosm – indirect translation is unavoidable;⁵⁸ equivalence between languages therefore becomes a secondary, not to say irrelevant, concern. Kadare uses the ‘archetype of the *dragoman*’ (literally an interpreter and translator of Arabic, Turkish or Persian, but broadly used by Kadare as an equivalent to the translator-interpreter in the history of the Balkans) as the embodiment of the *traduttore traditore* in Balkan ballads.⁵⁹ Because of this inherent paradox, translators-interpreters have frequently been (metaphorically or literally, and wrongly) sacrificed after having served,⁶⁰ as Kadare suggests with his suspicions concerning the existence of a fourth translator at the Moscow conference who, he presumes, must have mysteriously disappeared after completing his duties because of the secrets that s/he knew. *Dragomans*, in other words, are tragic heroes, at once essential mediators and scapegoats.

The two *ethe* woven in *L’Hiver* and *Les Quatre* come full circle: translators-interpreters are portrayed as complex figures who carry out the central, polyvalent and necessary, yet dangerous duty of ensuring interlingual and intercultural communication at the cost of their own lives, either metaphorically (as for Besnik Struga) or literally (as for the fourth translator-interpreter in *Les Quatre*) – the danger lying in accusations of mistranslation and, hence, treason.

Final thoughts

Reading *L’Hiver* and *Les Quatre* sheds light on the ways in which Kadare views translation as an unavoidable mediation in complex

⁵⁷ *Les Quatre*, 14.

⁵⁸ *Les Quatre*, 120.

⁵⁹ *Les Quatre*, 15.

⁶⁰ *Les Quatre*, 15.

political and historical settings. It is performed by translators-interpreters who are depicted as, on the one hand, visible, humanised and multifaceted characters and, on the other hand, 'tragic' characters immersed in the political and historical milieu in which they perform their duties. Their activity as mediators overshadows issues of linguistic correspondence between languages. Accusations of 'infidelity' to the source language are perceived as offensive and beyond the point: such accusations, at best, belong to fiction. Kadare's choice of Bellos as co-recipient of the MBI Prize comes as no surprise after all: these values ascribed to translation and translators-interpreters constitute a "prior *ethos*," albeit in another language (namely French), to the 2005 MBI Prize acceptance speech. A comparative look at Kadare's *ethos* has enabled us to better comprehend the author's particular *posture* of apparent indifference towards and non-engagement with issues of indirectness. Wittman's hypothesis is thus reinforced: Kadare conceivably rewards "Bellos the mediator," more than the linguistic transaction proper and the transmission of an 'invariant' in the source text.

Kadare had perceived and perhaps foreseen (and most likely enhanced) Bellos' important mediation in his reception in English. In fact, in the aftermath of the MBI Prize, Bellos repeatedly resurfaced as a mediator of Kadare's work in the English-speaking literary landscape. On 29 July 2005 (a few weeks after winning the MBI Prize), he rose up in "defence" of Kadare's image in the dissidence debate.⁶¹ Recently, Bellos contributed a considerable piece which discussed Kadare as world literature in the special issue of *World Literature Today* after Kadare obtained the 2020 Neustadt Prize for Literature.⁶² These two interventions, alongside the numerous forewords to his translations of Kadare's works and reviews, show how Bellos has consistently helped forge the *posture* of Kadare as a universal, anti-totalitarian, and world literature writer in the Anglophone world.

The values foregrounded by Bellos had already been extensively ascribed to Kadare in another centre of the world literary field: Paris. A closer look at his discourse unveils the influence of the ascription

⁶¹ Bellos, "In Defence of Ismail Kadare".

⁶² Bellos, "Why Should We Read Ismail Kadare?", 54-55.

of value to, and consecration of, Kadare in the French literary field. Further research is needed to determine to what extent Kadare's principal mediator has reasserted the legitimation frames that had been progressively forged in French and hence served as a consecrating connector. If this hypothesis is confirmed, to what extent does this imply that Kadare has directed his own reception in English by capitalising on indirect translation? In other words, did the writer perform a *tour de force* as his own mediator by deliberately considering triangulation as a legitimation opportunity during his first recognition event in English? If that is indeed the case, then the writer of this 'small literature', by pushing the right buttons, has undeniably exerted agency in his own reception within the centre of the world literary field by remodelling traditional values associated with indirect translation and by drawing on the positive mediation potential of the triangulation. Although these hypotheses remain tentative for the moment, further research is encouraged in order to better understand and nuance the centrality and agency of New York as the consecrating centre of world literature.

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