



twayne

companion to
contemporary
world literature

from the editors of *world literature today*

pamela a. genova
editor

volume 2

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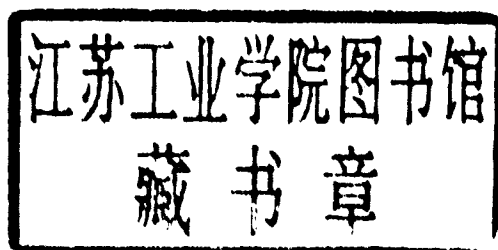
volume

2

parts VI–VIII

appendices

index



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Twayne Companion to Contemporary World Literature: From the Editors of *World Literature Today*

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Twayne companion to contemporary world literature : from the editors of *World Literature Today* / edited by Pamela A. Genova.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8057-1700-5 (hard : set) — ISBN 0-8057-1701-3 (v. 1) — ISBN 0-8057-1702-1 (v. 2)

1. Literature, Modern—20th century—History and criticism. I. Genova, Pamela Antonia, 1961- II. *World Literature Today*.

PN771 .T93 2003
809'.04—dc21

2002152498

Revised

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2



Contents

■ VOLUME 1

Introduction. x v i i

I. Perspectives on World Literature

- Anna Balakian, "Theorizing Comparison: The Pyramid of Similitude and Difference." 1
- Yves Bonnefoy, "On the Translation of Form in Poetry." 5
- Michel Butor, "The Origin of the Text." 11
- Mary Ann Caws, "Reading, the Cast Shadows: A Reflection." 17
- Robert J. Clements, "World Literature Tomorrow." 23
- Jonathan Culler, "Comparability." 28
- Max Frisch, "We Hope." 31
- Claudio Guillén, "Distant Relations: French, Anglo-American, Hispanic." 36
- Michael Hamburger, "The Survival of Poetry." 41
- Linda Hutcheon, "Productive Comparative Angst: Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism." 43
- Alfred Kazin, "We See from the Periphery, Not the Center: Reflections on Literature in an Age of Crisis." 48
- J. Hillis Miller, "'World Literature' in the Age of Telecommunications." 55
- Paul Nizon, "Exile: Multiculturalism as Stimulant." 58
- Octavio Paz, "The Liberal Tradition." 60
- Marjorie Perloff, "Barthes and the Zero Degree of Genre." 63
- Marjorie Perloff, "'Living in the Same Place': The Old Mononationalism and the New Comparative Literature." 71
- Henri Peyre, "Beyond Cultural Nationalism." 77

- William Riggan, "The Swedish Academy and the Nobel Prize in Literature: History and Procedure." 85
- Dalia Ross-Daniel, "Memory and Reconstruction of Self in Contemporary Yiddish Literature." . . . 92
- Leslie Schenk, "The Western Canon." 97
- Elie Wiesel, "A Vision of the Apocalypse." 100

II. The Arab World and the Middle East

GENERAL

- Saad Al-Bazei, "Tension in the House: The Contemporary Poetry of Arabia." 105
- Roger Allen, "Arabic Literature and the Nobel Prize." 110
- Roger Allen, "Literary History and the Arabic Novel." 114
- Miriam Cooke, "Telling Their Lives: A Hundred Years of Arab Women's Writings." 121
- Jean Déjeux, "Major Currents in North African Novels in French since 1966." 126
- Nada Elia, "In the Making: Beur Fiction and Identity Construction." 130
- Mona N. Mikhail, "Middle Eastern Literature and the Conditions of Modernity: An Introduction." 138
- Muhammad Siddiq, "The Contemporary Arabic Novel in Perspective." 140
- Saadi A. Simawe, "Modernism and Metaphor in Contemporary Arabic Poetry." 146

ALGERIA

- Evelyne Accad, "Assia Djebar's Contribution to Arab Women's Literature: Rebellion, Maturity, Vision." 154
- Patricia Geesey, "Algerian Fiction and the Civil Crisis: Bodies under Siege." 167

Eric Sellin, "Moloud Mammeri Returns to the Mountains."	176
---	-----

EGYPT

Roger Allen, "Najib Mahfuz: Nobel Laureate in Literature, 1988."	177
Abdel-Aziz Hammouda, "Modern Egyptian Theatre: Three Major Dramatists."	182

ISRAEL

Étan Levine, "Writing in Hebrew."	187
Yair Mazor, "Besieged Feminism: Contradictory Rhetorical Themes in the Poetry of Daliah Rabikovitz."	192
Gila Ramras-Rauch, "Aharon Appelfeld: A Hundred Years of Jewish Solitude."	198
Emanuel Rubin, "Israel's Theatre of Confrontation."	205
Eisig Silberschlag, "Redemptive Vision in Hebrew Literature."	211
Leon I. Yudkin, "Memorialization in New Fiction."	218

LEBANON

Mona Takieddine Amyuni, "Literature and War, Beirut 1993–1995: Three Case Studies."	226
Ruth A. Hottell, "A Poetics of Pain: Evelyn Accad's Critical and Fictional World."	231
Charles R. Larson, "The Fiction of Hanan Al-Shaykh, Reluctant Feminist."	237

SYRIA

Admer Gouryeh, "Recent Trends in Syrian Drama."	241
Mohja Kahf, "The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature."	246

TURKEY

Guzine Dino, "The Turkish Peasant Novel, or The Anatolian Theme."	255
Güneli Gün, "The Turks Are Coming: Deciphering Orhan Pamuk's <i>Black Book</i> ."	266
Djelal Kadir, "Turkish Family Romance."	270

YEMEN

Mohammed Saad Al-Jumly and J. Barton Rollins, "Emigration and the Rise of the Novel in Yemen."	271
--	-----

III. Africa and the Caribbean

Africa

GENERAL

Unionmwan Edebiri, "Toward a Convention of Modern African Drama."	281
Charles R. Larson, "The Precarious State of the African Writer."	286
Gerald M. Moser, "Neglected or Forgotten Authors of Lusophone Africa."	290
S. E. Ogude, "Slavery and the African Imagination: A Critical Perspective."	294
Isidore Okpewho, "Comparatism and Separatism in African Literature."	298
Valérie Orlando, "Writing New H(er)stories for Francophone Women of Africa and the Caribbean."	306

ANGOLA

Fernando Martinho, "The Poetry of Agostinho Neto."	315
--	-----

CAMEROON

C. P. Sarvan, "French Colonialism in Africa: The Early Novels of Ferdinand Oyono."	319
--	-----

CONGO

Betty O'Grady, "Tchicaya U Tam'Si: Some Thoughts on the Poet's Symbolic Mode of Expression."	324
Hal Wylie, "The Dancing Masks of Sylvain Bemba."	329

GHANA

Ode S. Ogede, "Angled Shots and Reflections: On the Literary Essays of Ayi Kwei Armah."	334
Derek Wright, "The Metaphysical and Material Worlds: Ayi Kwei Armah's Ritual Cycle."	340

KENYA

Robert Cancel, "Literary Criticism as Social Philippic and Personal Exorcism: Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's Critical Writings."	346
---	-----

NIGERIA

Ezenwa-Ohaeto, "Bridges of Orality: Nigerian Pidgin Poetry."	350
Chinyere G. Okafor, "Ola Rotimi: The Man, the Playwright and the Producer on the Nigerian Theatre Scene."	359

- Derek Wright, "Soyinka's Smoking Shotgun:
The Later Satires." 365

SENEGAL

- Samba Gadjigo, "Social Vision in Aminata
Sow Fall's Literary Work." 372

SOMALIA

- Jacqueline Bardolph, "Brothers and Sisters in
Nuruddin Farah's Two Trilogies." 377

SOUTH AFRICA

- André Brink, "Reinventing a Continent
(Revisiting History in the Literature of the New
South Africa: A Personal Testimony)." 383
- Michael J. Collins, "The Sabotage of Love:
Athol Fugard's Recent Plays." 390
- Barbara J. Eckstein, "Nadine Gordimer: Nobel
Laureate in Literature, 1991." 393
- Mazisi Kunene, "Some Aspects of South African
Literature." 397
- Louise Viljoen, "Postcolonialism and Recent
Women's Writing in Afrikaans." 401

Caribbean

CARIBBEAN IN ENGLISH

- Stephen Breslow, "Derek Walcott: 1992 Nobel
Laureate in Literature." 411
- Carolyn T. Brown, "The Myth of the Fall and
the Dawning of Consciousness in George
Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*." 416
- John L. Brown, "V. S. Naipaul: A Wager on the
Triumph of Darkness." 421
- Cyril Dabydeen, "Places We Come From:
Voices of Caribbean Canadian Writers
(in English) and Multicultural Contexts." 426
- Charles P. Sarvan and Hasan Marhama,
"The Fictional Works of Caryl Phillips:
An Introduction." 433
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Kamau Brathwaite:
The Voice of African Presence." 439

CARIBBEAN IN FRENCH

- Maryse Condé, "The Role of the Writer." 441
- Gerise Herndon, "Gender Construction and
Neocolonialism." 444
- E. Anthony Hurley, "Loving Words: New
Lyricism in French Caribbean Poetry." 450

- Renée Larrier, "The Poetics of Ex-ile: Simone
Schwarz-Bart's *Ton beau capitaine*." 456

- Robert H. McCormick Jr. "Desirada—A New
Conception of Identity: An Interview with
Maryse Condé." 458

- Mildred Mortimer, "Whose House Is This?
Space and Place in Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le
soleil qui m'a brûlée* and *La Petite Fille
du réverbère*." 467

- Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond the Word of Man:
Glissant and the New Discourse of the
Antilles." 474

CUBA

- Isabel Alvarez-Borland, "Displacements and
Autobiography in Cuban-American
Fiction." 486
- Rocío G. Davis, "Back to the Future: Mothers,
Languages and Homes in Cristina García's
Dreaming in Cuban." 492
- Guillermo Cabrera Infante, "Brief Encounters in
Havana." 499
- Suzanne Jill Levine, "Vistas of Dawn in the
(Tristes) Tropics: History, Fiction,
Translation." 506

IV. Asia

East Asia

CHINA

- Michael S. Duke, "Walking Toward the World:
A Turning Point in Contemporary Chinese
Fiction." 513
- Howard Goldblatt, "Fresh Flowers Abloom
Again: Chinese Literature on the Rebound." 518
- John Kwan-Terry, "Chinese Literature and
the Nobel Prize." 521
- Agnes Lam, "Poetry in Hong Kong:
The 1990s." 528
- K. C. Leung, "Literature in the Service of Politics:
The Chinese Literary Scene since 1949." 537
- Sylvia Li-Chun Lin, "Between the Individual
and the Collective: Gao Xingjian's Fiction." 539
- John Marney, "PRC Politics and Literature in the
Nineties." 544
- Jeffrey Twitchell and Huang Fan,
"Avant-Garde Poetry in China: The
Nanjing Scene 1981–1992." 549
- David Der-Wei Wang, "The Literary World of
Mo Yan." 555

Mo Yan, "My Three American Books." 562

JAPAN

David G. Goodman, "The Return of the Gods:
Theatre in Japan Today." 565

Yoshio Iwamoto, "The Nobel Prize in Literature,
1967–1987: A Japanese View." 567

Yoshio Iwamoto, "A Voice from Postmodern
Japan: Haruki Murakami." 572

Bettina L. Knapp, "Mishima's Cosmic Noh
Drama: *The Damask Drum*." 578

Celeste Loughman, "The Seamless Universe of Ōe
Kenzaburō." 583

Kenzaburō Ōe, "Japan's Dual Identity: A Writer's
Dilemma." 589

Makoto Ōoka, "Contemporary Japanese
Poetry." 600

Sanroku Yoshida, "An Interview with Kenzaburō
Ōe." 603

KOREA

Brother Anthony of Taizé, "From Korean History
to Korean Poetry: Ko Un and Ku Sang." 609

TAIWAN

Dominic Cheung, "The Continuity of Modern
Chinese Poetry in Taiwan." 614

Ying-Ying Chien, "From Utopian to Dystopian
World: Two Faces of Feminism in
Contemporary Taiwanese Women's
Fiction." 620

Central Asia

AZERBAIJAN

Keith Hitchins, "Theme and Character in the
Azerbaijani Novel, 1930–1957." 627

Shouleh Vatanabadi, "Past, Present, Future, and
Postcolonial Discourse in Modern Azerbaijani
Literature." 632

IRAN

Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak, "Poetry against Piety:
The Literary Response to the Iranian
Revolution." 637

Nasrin Rahimieh, "The Quince-Orange Tree, or
Iranian Writers in Exile." 643

Rivanne Sandler, "Literary Developments in
Iran in the 1960s and the 1970s Prior to the
1978 Revolution." 648

John Zubizarreta, "The Woman Who Sings No,
No, No: Love, Freedom, and Rebellion in the
Poetry of Forugh Farrokhzad." 653

KAZAKSTAN

Asiya Baigozhina, "A Dilettante's Marginal
Notes on National Literature." 659

KYRGYZSTAN

Bekdash Shamshiev, "Post-Socialist Kyrgyz
Literature: Crisis or Renaissance?" 662

TAJIKISTAN

John R. Perry, "Tajik Literature: Seventy Years Is
Longer Than the Millenium." 665

TURKMENISTAN

Khudayberdy Durdyev, "Toward a New
Maturity." 667

UZBEKISTAN

Tahir Qahhar, "Uzbek Literature." 671

South Asia

INDIA

Kanishka Chowdhury, "Revisioning History:
Shashi Tharoor's *Great Indian Novel*." 678

Vinay Dharwadker, "Indian Writing Today:
A View from 1994." 686

R. K. Gupta, "Trends in Modern Indian
Fiction." 690

Wilson Harris, "Raja Rao's Inimitable Style
and Art of Fiction." 699

Walter J. Meserve, "Shakuntala's Daughters:
Women in Contemporary Indian Drama." 703

R. Parthasarathy, "Tamil Literature." 706

John Oliver Perry, "Contemporary Indian
Poetry in English." 713

Sudeep Sen, "New Indian Poetry: The 1990s
Perspective." 724

PAKISTAN

Alamgir Hashmi, "Poetry, Pakistani Idiom in
English, and the Groupies." 731

Alamgir Hashmi, "'A Stylized Motif of Eagle
Wings Woven': The Selected Poems of
Zulfikar Ghose." 735

SRI LANKA

- D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke, "Sri Lanka's 'Ethnic' Conflict in Its Literature in English." 739
- Anders Sjöbohm, "Poverty, Pride and Memory: On the Writings of Basil Fernando." 743

Southeast Asia
MALAYSIA

- C. S. Lim, "A Survey of Malaysian Poetry in English." 747
- Wong Ming Yook, "Traversing Boundaries: Journeys into Malaysian Fiction in English." . . . 751

PHILIPPINES

- Gémino H. Abad, "One Hundred Years of Filipino Poetry: An Overview." 757
- Rocio G. Davis, "Postcolonial Visions and Immigrant Longings: Ninotchka Rosca's Versions of the Philippines." 761
- Ophelia A. Dimalanta, "Philippine Literature in English: Tradition and Change." 768
- Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, "The Philippine Novel in English into the Twenty-first Century." 772

SINGAPORE

- Leong Liew Geok, "Dissenting Voices: Political Engagements in the Singaporean Novel in English." 776
- Rajeev S. Patke, "Poetry in English from Singapore." 783

Australia and New Zealand
GENERAL

- David Coad, "Patrick White: Prophet in the Wilderness." 789
- Kevin Hart, "Open, Mixed, and Moving: Recent Australian Poetry." 794
- Murray S. Martin, "Who Is the Colonist? Writing in New Zealand and the South Pacific." 802
- Peter Pierce, "Australian Literature since Patrick White." 806
- John Scheckter, "Dreaming Wholeness: David Malouf's New Stories." 810
- Norman Simms, "Maori Literature in English: An Introduction." 818

V. Latin America
GENERAL

- Marta Caminero-Santángelo, "Contesting the Boundaries of Exile: Latino/a Literature." 825
- Manuel Durán, "The Nobel Prize and Writers in the Hispanic World: A Continuing Story." 834
- Mario Vargas Llosa, "Social Commitment and the Latin American Writer." 838

ARGENTINA

- Edna Aizenberg, "Borges, Postcolonial Precursor." 842
- Ronald Christ, "A Last Interview with Manuel Puig." 849
- Suzanne Jill Levine, "Manuel among the Stars (Exit Laughing)." 856
- Z. Nelly Martinez, "Dangerous Messianisms: The World According to Valenzuela." 864

BRAZIL

- Robert E. DiAntonio, "Biblical Correspondences and Eschatological Questioning in the Metafiction of Murilo Rubião." 869
- Luiza Lobo, "Women Writers in Brazil Today." . . . 874
- Wilson Martins, "Carlos Drummond de Andrade and the Heritage of *Modernismo*." 880
- Klaus Müller-Bergh, "*Feijoada*, Coke and the Urbanoid: Brazilian Poetry since 1945." 882
- John M. Parker, "João Cabral de Melo Neto: 'Literalist of the Imagination'." 891
- Roberto Reis, "Who's Afraid of (Luso-) Brazilian Literature?" 898

COLOMBIA

- Michael Palencia-Roth, "Gabriel García Márquez: Labyrinths of Love and History." 902
- Gregory Rabassa, "García Márquez's New Book: Literature or Journalism?" 907

COSTA RICA

- Ann González, "Fabián Dobles: Memories of a Costa Rican Novelist." 910

MEXICO

- Manuel Durán, "Octavio Paz: Nobel Laureate in Literature, 1990." 913

- Wendy B. Faris, "The Return of the Past:
Chiasmus in the Texts of Carlos Fuentes." 916
- Carlos Fuentes, "On Reading and Writing Myself:
How I Wrote *Aura*." 923

PERU

- Gregory Rabassa, "'O Tempora, O Mores':
Time, Tense and Tension in Mario
Vargas Llosa." 932

URUGUAY

- Fernando Ainsa, "Juan Carlos Onetti
(1909–1994): An Existential Allegory of
Contemporary Man." 935

■ VOLUME 2

VI. Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Balkans

ALBANIA

- Janet Byron, "Albanian Nationalism and
Socialism in the Fiction of Ismail Kadare." 939
- Robert Elsie, "Evolution and Revolution in
Modern Albanian Literature." 941

BULGARIA

- Sidney Rosenfeld, "1981 Nobel Laureate Elias
Canetti: A Writer Apart." 949

CROATIA

- Martha Kuhlman, "The Ex(centric) Mind of
Europe: Dubravka Ugrešić." 954

CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

- Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, "Václav Havel:
A Writer for Today's Season." 959
- Wilma A. Iggers, "The World of Jaroslav
Seifert." 964
- Milan Kundera, "1968: Prague, Paris, and
Josef Škvoreck." 968
- Peter Kussi, "Milan Kundera: Dialogues with
Fiction." 971

GREECE

- Peter Bien, "The Predominance of Poetry in
Greek Literature." 975
- E. D. Karampetsos, "Tyranny and Myth
in the Plays of Four Contemporary
Greek Dramatists." 978
- Marios Byron Raizis, "The Stream of
Consciousness in Greek Fiction." 982

HUNGARY

- Robert Murray Davis, "Desperate but Not
Serious: The Situation of Hungarian
Literature in the Nineties." 991
- George Gömöri, "Literature and Revolution in
Hungary." 1000
- Ivan Sanders, "Freedom's Captives: Notes on
George Konrád's Novels." 1003

POLAND

- Joseph Brodsky, "Presentation of Czesław
Miłosz to the Jury." 1008
- Bogdana Carpenter, "Wisława Szymborska
and the Importance of the Unimportant." 1009
- Krzysztof Dybciak, "The Poetic Phenomenology
of a Religious Man: About the Literary
Creativity of Karol Wojtyła." 1014
- Regina Grol, "Eroticism and Exile: Anna Frajlich's
Poetry." 1022
- Jerzy R. Krzyżanowski, "*The Captive Mind*
Revisited." 1027
- Tomas Venclova, "Czesław Miłosz:
Despair and Grace." 1031
- Reuel K. Wilson, "Stanisław Lem's Fiction
and the Cosmic Absurd." 1035

ROMANIA

- Matei Calinescu, "Romanian Literature:
Dealing with the Totalitarian Legacy." 1040

RUSSIA

- Chingiz Aitmatov, "The Intellectual Crisis, the
Demise of Totalitarianism, and the Fate of
Literature." 1045
- Ellen Chances, "'In the Middle of the Contrast':
Andrei Bitov and the Act of Writing in the
Contemporary World." 1052
- David Gillespie, "Russian Writers Confront
the Past: History, Memory, and Literature,
1953–1991." 1055
- Sidney Hook, "Solzhenitsyn and Western
Freedom." 1061
- Sidney Monas, "Words Devouring Things:
The Poetry of Joseph Brodsky." 1066
- Joseph P. Mozur, "Chingiz Aitmatov:
Transforming the Esthetics of
Socialist Realism." 1071

SLOVENIA

- Robert Murray Davis, "Out of the Shadows:
Slovene Writing after Independence." 1076

UKRAINE

- Marta Tarnawsky, "Ukrainian Literature for the
American Reader." 1082

YUGOSLAVIA

- Gorka Aulestia, "A Comparative Study of
Basque and Yugoslav Troubadourism." 1085
Vasa D. Mihailovich, "The Karamazov
Syndrome in Recent Yugoslav Literature." . . . 1090

VII. Northern Europe

GENERAL

- Kathleen Osgood Dana, "Sámi Literature in the
Twentieth Century." 1095
W. Glyn Jones, "Naïve, Naïvistic, Artistic: Some
Thoughts on Danish and Swedish Diaries." . . 1101
George C. Schoolfield, "Might-Have-Beens: The
North and the Nobel Prize, 1967–1987." . . . 1105

BALTIC STATES

- Karl E. Jirgens, "Carnival of Death: Writing in
Latvia since Independence." 1110
Rimvydas Šilbajoris, "Post-Soviet Literature in
Lithuania: An Overview." 1123
Jüri Talvet, "The State of Estonian Literature
Following the Reestablishment
of Independence." 1131

DENMARK

- Sven H. Rossel, "Ole Hyltoft and the
Neorealistic Trends in Contemporary
Danish Literature." 1136

FINLAND

- Kai Laitinen, "Finland and World Literature." . . 1140
Juhani Salokannel, "Unusual Men: Three
Masters of Contemporary Finnish Prose." . . . 1146
Kirsti Simonsuuri, "The Lyrical Space: On
the Poetry of Paavo Haavikko." 1149

ICELAND

- Sigurður Magnússon, "Postwar Literature in
Iceland." 1153

NORWAY

- Frederick Hale, "Tor Edvin Dahl and the
Poverty of Norwegian Prosperity." 1158
Jan Sjøvik, "Alfred Hauge's Utstein Monastery
Cycle." 1163

SWEDEN

- Jeanette Lee Atkinson, "Karl Ragnar Gierow:
A Skeptic's Way." 1167
Robert Bly, "Tomas Tranströmer and
'The Memory'." 1173
Helena Forsås-Scott, "In Defense of People and
Forests: Sara Lidman's Recent Novels." 1176
Sven H. Rossel, "Gunnar Ekelöf: Poet,
Visionary, and Outsider." 1181

VIII. Western Europe

FRANCE

- Anna Balakian, "René Char in Search of
the Violet Man." 1185
John L. Brown, "Brassaï, the Writer." 1189
Sophie Jollin, "From the Renaudot Prize to the
Puterbaugh Conference: The Reception of
J. M. G. Le Clézio." 1195
Adele King, "*Le premier homme*: Camus's
Unfinished Novel." 1200
Warren Motte, "Writing Away." 1203
Henri Peyre, "Marguerite Yourcenar:
Independent, Imaginative, and
'Immortal'." 1209
Leon S. Roudiez, "Michel Butor: Past,
Present, and Future." 1214
Jean Starobinski, "On Yves Bonnefoy: Poetry,
Between Two Worlds." 1219

GERMANY

- Karein Goertz, "Transgenerational
Representations of the Holocaust:
From Memory to 'Post-Memory'." 1227
Iman O. Khalil, "Arab-German Literature." 1233
Ursula Mahlendorf, "Confronting the
Fascist Past and Coming to Terms with It." . . 1240
Dietger Pforte, "Disunitedly United: Literary
Life in Germany." 1246
Edouard Roditi, "Paul Celan and the Cult of
Personality." 1260
Peter Schneider, "All My Foreigners." 1269

- A. Leslie Willson, "Entering the Eighties:
The Mosaic of German Literatures:
Introduction." 1276
- Theodore Ziolkowski, "Günter Grass's
Century." 1280

IRELAND

- Joan Trodden Keefe, "Dwelling in Impossibility:
Contemporary Irish Gaelic Literature and
Séamas Mac Annaidh." 1285
- Brendan P. O Hehir, "Re-Grafting a Severed
Tongue: The Pains (and Politics) of
Reviving Irish." 1291
- William Pratt, "The Great Irish Elk:
Seamus Heaney's Personal Helicon." 1296
- William Pratt, "Brian Friel's Imaginary
Journeys to Nowhere." 1302

ITALY

- Glauco Cambon, "Modern Poetry and Its
Prospects in Italy." 1307
- Rosario Ferreri, "Eugenio Montale's *Diario
postumo*." 1310
- Armando Gnisci, "Contemporary Italian
Literature from a Comparatist's
Perspective." 1312
- Domenico Maceri, "Dario Fo: Jester of the
Working Class." 1316
- Olga Ragusa, "Italo Calvino: The Repeated
Conquest of Contemporaneity." 1322
- Giose Rimanelli, "The Poetry of 'Limited' Exile
and Its Revealing Trek among Italy's Small
Presses." 1327

NETHERLANDS

- Fred J. Nichols, "Jacques Hamelink: A Man
Armed with the Imagination." 1338
- Manfred Wolf, "On the Poetry of Albert
Verwey." 1344

PORTUGAL

- John Austin Kerr, Jr. "Some Considerations on
Rodrigues Miguéis's 'Léah'." 1345
- Richard A. Preto-Rodas, "José Saramago: Art for
Reason's Sake." 1349
- Alex Severino, "Fernando Pessoa's Legacy: The
Presença and After." 1357

- Frederick G. Williams, "Prodigious Exorcist:
An Introduction to the Poetry of Jorge de
Sena." 1361

SPAIN

- Janet W. Díaz, "Spain's Vernacular Literatures
in the Post-Franco Era." 1368
- Manuel Durán, "Vicente Aleixandre, Last of
the Romantics: The 1977 Nobel Prize for
Literature." 1373
- Manuel Durán, "Fiction and Metafiction in
Contemporary Spanish Letters." 1379
- David William Foster, "Camilo José Cela: 1989
Nobel Prize in Literature." 1383
- Ricardo Gullón, "Twentieth-Century Spanish
Poetry." 1387
- David H. Rosenthal, "The Poetry of
J. V. Foix." 1392

SWITZERLAND

- Marianne Burkhard, "Gauging Existential
Space: The Emergence of Women Writers
in Switzerland." 1397
- Francis Michael Sharp, "Max Frisch:
A Writer in a Technological Age." 1402
- H. M. Waidson, "Silvio Blatter: Realism and
Society in Modern Switzerland." 1407

UNITED KINGDOM

- Margaret C. Bradham, "Barbara Pym's
Women." 1413
- Kathleen Chase, "Legend and Legacy: Some
Bloomsburg Diaries." 1420
- Michael J. Collins, "Recovering a Tradition:
Anglo-Welsh Poetry 1480-1980." 1424
- Rufus Cook, "Place and Displacement in
Salman Rushdie's Work." 1428
- John M. Jones, "The Renaissance of
Welsh Letters." 1434
- David Lloyd, "Welsh Writing in English." 1437
- G. Ross Roy, "The Thorn on Scotland's Rose:
Hugh MacDiarmid." 1441
- Susan Rusinko, "The Last Romantic:
Henry Boot, Alias Tom Stoppard." 1444

Appendix A: The Best of *Books Abroad* (*World Literature Today*, 63:2, Spring 1989)

Ivar Ivask, "Introducing Our 250th Issue." 1449

WRITERS

Ivar Ivask, "Ivan Bunin." [1934] 1451

Werner Neuse, "Franz Kafka." [1935] 1452

Joseph Remenyi, "Mihály Babits." [1935] 1454

William Berrien, "Spain Loses a Great Poet."
[1937]. 1456

Dominico Vittorini, "Luigi Pirandello at Close
Range." [1937] 1458

Ernst Waldinger, "My Uncle Sigmund Freud."
[1941]. 1462

Robert J. Ray, "The Novels of Raja Rao."
[1966]. 1465

Anthony Zahareas, "George Seferis: Myth and
History." [1968] 1468

Paulène Aspel, "The Poetry of René Char,
or Man Reconciled." [1968] 1474

Helen Wolff, "Heimito von Doderer." [1968] 1477

James T. Araki, "Kawabata: Achievements of
the Nobel Laureate." [1969] 1478

Giuseppe Ungaretti, "Presentation of Allen
Ginsberg's Poems (Naples 1966)." [1970] 1481

Czesław Miłosz, "On Pasternak Soberly."
[1970]. 1484

Jorge Guillén, "Remembering Valéry." [1971] . . . 1490

Alexander Aspel, "Ice, Stars, Stones, Birds,
Trees: Three Major Postwar Estonian Poets
Abroad." [1973] 1494

Harry Levin, "Francis Ponge, 34 rue
Lhomond." [1974] 1501

Kimón Friar, "The Imagery and Collages
of Odysseus Elytis." [1975]. 1503

TOPICS

A. A. Roback, "Yiddish Writing in America."
[1934]. 1509

Seán O'Faolain, "Ireland after Yeats." [1952] . . . 1511

Northrop Frye, "English Canadian Literature
1929–1954." [1955] 1516

Taha Hussein, "The Modern Renaissance
of Arabic Literature." [1955]. 1519

Charles Willeford, "To a Nephew in College."
[1957]. 1527

John Povey, "Contemporary West African
Writing in English." [1966]. 1528

Herbert Howarth, "A Petition to the Swedish
Academy." [1967] 1534

Mario Vargas Llosa, "The Latin American Novel
Today." [1970] 1536

Olof Lagercrantz, "A Literary Prize in
Oklahoma." [1974]. 1542

Bernice Duncan, "Recollections of *Books
Abroad*: And So It Grew." [1976]. 1543

Appendix B: World Literature in Review (A Selection of Book Reviews, 1977–2001)

1977

Michel Butor, *Matière de rêves* (Anna Otten) 1549

Nadine Gordimer, *Selected Stories*
(Robert L. Berner). 1549

Adil Jussawalla, *Missing Person* (Vilas Sarang) . . . 1550

Primo Levi, *Il sistema periodico* (Mirna Risk) 1550

Flann O'Brien, *Stories and Plays*; Anne Clissmann,
*Flann O'Brien: A Critical Introduction to His
Writings* (Joan Keefe). 1551

Christa Wolf, *Kindheitsmuster* (W. V. Blomster). . . 1552

1978

Günter Grass, *Der Butt* (Henry Hatfield) 1552

Václav Havel, *Hry 1970–1976* (Michael Heim). . . 1553

Kenzaburō Ōe, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness*
(Emiko Sakurai) 1554

Saint-John Perse, *Chant pour un Equinoxe*
(Daniel L. Racine). 1554

Tom Stoppard, *Dirty Linen and New-Found-Land*
(Francine Leffler Ringold). 1555

Mario Vargas Llosa, *La tía Julia y el escribidor*
(José Miguel Oviedo) 1556

1979

Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems in English
and French; Poèmes suivis de Mirlitonnades*
(Martha Fehsenfeld) 1556

Max Frisch, *Triptychon* (Franz P. Haberl) 1558

Patrick Modiano, *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*
(Judith L. Greenberg) 1558

Vladimir Nabokov, *Sogliadata*
(Stephen Jan Parker). 1559

V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (John Cooke) . . 1559

Michel Tournier, *Le coq de bruyère*
(Danièle McDowell) 1560

1980

- André Brink, *A Dry White Season*
(Sheila Roberts) 1560
- Marnix Gijsen, *Rustoord* (Philip Smyth) 1561
- Lao She, *Rickshaw: The Novel*
(James M. Hargett) 1562
- Stanisław Lem, *The Chain of Chance*
(Tom J. Lewis) 1562
- Doris Lessing, *Shikasta* (Shernaz Mollinger) 1563
- Edwin Thumboo, *Ulysses by the Merlion*
(Charlotte H. Bruner) 1563

1981

- Simone de Beauvoir, *Quand prime le spirituel*
(Lucille Becker) 1564
- J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*
(Barend J. Toerien) 1564
- Assia Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Hédi Abdeljaouad) 1565
- Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa*
(Gian-Paolo Biasin) 1565
- Pablo Neruda, *El río invisible: Poesía y prosa de juventud* (Carlos Cortínez) 1566
- Simone Schwarz-Bart, *Ti Jean L'Horizon*
(Wilbert J. Roget) 1567

1982

- Camilo José Cela, *Vuelta de hoja* (Luis Larios) . . . 1568
- Maria Julieta Drummond de Andrade, *Um buquê de alcachofras* (Earl E. Fitz) 1568
- Nuruddin Farah, *Sweet and Sour Milk*
(Peter Nazareth) 1568
- Georges Perec, *Théâtre I: La poche parmentier précédé de L'augmentation* (Eric Sellin) 1569
- Marta Traba, *Conversación al sur*
(Naomi Lindstrom) 1569
- Wang Wei, *The Poetry of Wang Wei: New Translations and Commentary*
(James M. Hargett) 1570

1983

- José Manuel Caballero Bonald, *Toda la noche oyeron pasar pájaros*
(Luis Larios Vendrell) 1571
- Nikos Kazantzakis, *Two Plays: "Sodom and Gomorra" and "Comedy: A Tragedy in One Act"* (John E. Rexine) 1571
- George Konrád, *The Loser* (George Gömöri) 1572

- Bernard Malamud, *God's Grace* (Rita D. Jacobs) . . 1573
- Eugenio Montale, *Altri versi* (G. Singh) 1573
- Philippe Sollers, *Femmes* (Leon S. Roudiez) 1574

1984

- Silvio Blatter, *Kein schöner Land*
(Peter Spycher) 1575
- Lawrence Durrell, *Constance, or Solitary Practices; Sebastian, or Ruling Passions*
(Leslie B. Mittleman) 1575
- Yukio Mishima, *Cinq Nô modernes*
(Bettina L. Knapp) 1576
- Harold Pinter, *Other Places: A Kind of Alaska; Victoria Station; Family Voices*
(Susan Rusinko) 1576
- Salman Rushdie, *Shame*
(Robert E. McDowell) 1577
- Animata Sow Fall, *L'appel des arènes* (Frederic Michelman) 1578

1985

- Italo Calvino, *Palomar* (Olga Ragusa) 1578
- Marguerite Duras, *L'amant* (Lucille F. Becker) . . . 1579
- Yūsuf Idrīs, *The Sinners* (Roger Allen) 1579
- Yashar Kemal, *The Sea-Crossed Fisherman*
(Edouard Roditi) 1580
- Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le miroir qui revient*
(Bettina L. Knapp) 1581
- Ramón Rubín, *El canto de la grilla*
(George R. McMurray) 1581

1986

- Heinrich Böll, *Frauen vor Flußlandschaft*
(Theodore Ziolkowski) 1582
- Jorge Luis Borges, *Los conjurados*
(William Ferguson) 1582
- Carlos Fuentes, *Gringo Viejo* (Mary E. Davis) . . . 1582
- Mavis Gallant, *Home Truths*
(Alice-Catherine Carls) 1583
- Milan Kundera, *Nesnesitelná lehkost bytí; The Unbearable Lightness of Being*
(Maria Nĕmcová Banerjee) 1584
- Henri Michaux, *Déplacements dégageements*
(Michael Bishop) 1585

1987

- Maryse Condé, *Moi, Tituba, sorcière noire de Salem* (Charlotte H. Bruner) 1585

Odysseus Elytis, <i>What I Love: Selected Poems of Odysseus Elytis</i> (Jeffrey Carson)	1586
Eugène Ionesco, <i>Non</i> (Marguerite Dorian)	1587
Clarice Lispector, <i>An Apprenticeship, or The Book of Delights</i> (Nelson H. Vieira)	1588
Bienvenido N. Santos, <i>The Volcano; Villa Magdalena</i> (Joseph A. Galdon, S. J.)	1589
Derek Walcott, <i>Three Plays</i> (Reed Way Dasenbrock)	1590

1988

Chingiz Aitmatov, <i>Plakha</i> (Joseph Mozur)	1590
Edward Kamau Brathwaite, <i>Roots</i> (A. L. McLeod)	1591
Bruce Chatwin, <i>Songlines</i> (Ray Willbanks)	1592
Mohammed Dib, <i>O Vive</i> (Eric Sellin)	1592
Joe Orton, <i>Head to Toe</i> (Susan Rusinko)	1593
Isaac Bashevis Singer, <i>The Death of Methuselah and Other Stories</i> (Lothar Kahn)	1593

1989

Kobo Abe, <i>The Ark Sakura</i> (Yoshio Iwamoto) . . .	1594
Julien Gracq, <i>Autour des sept collines</i> (Edouard Roditi)	1594
Edna O'Brien, <i>The High Road</i> (Cynthia M. Tompkins)	1595
Christiane Rochefort, <i>La porte du fond</i> (Judith L. Greenberg)	1595
Wole Soyinka, <i>Mandela's Earth and Other Poems</i> (Reed Way Dasenbrock)	1596
Muriel Spark, <i>A Far Cry from Kensington</i> (Mona Knapp)	1596

1990

Evelyn Accad, <i>L'excisée</i> (Peter Nazareth)	1597
Anthony Burgess, <i>Any Old Iron</i> (Leslie B. Mittleman)	1598
Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>The Remains of the Day</i> (William Hutchings)	1598
Manuel Puig, <i>Cae la noche tropical</i> (Malva Filer)	1599
Tomas Tranströmer, <i>För levande och döda</i> (Steven P. Sondrup)	1599
Elie Wiesel, <i>Loublié</i> (Pierre L. Horn)	1600

1991

A. S. Byatt, <i>Possession</i> (Mary Kaiser)	1600
--	------

Hélène Cixous, <i>Jours de l'an</i> (Judith L. Greenberg)	1601
Gabriel García Márquez, <i>El general en su laberinto</i> (William L. Siemens)	1601
Nadine Gordimer, <i>My Son's Story</i> (Bruce King) . .	1602
Ismail Kadare, <i>Broken April</i> (Robert Elsie)	1603
David Malouf, <i>The Great World</i> (Ray Willbanks)	1603

1992

Tariq Ali, <i>Redemption</i> (Alamgir Hashmi)	1604
Jamaica Kincaid, <i>Lucy</i> (Evelyn J. Hawthorne) . . .	1605
J. M. G. Le Clézio, <i>Onitsha</i> (Marilyn Gaddis Rose)	1606
Wisława Szymborska, <i>People on a Bridge</i> (Bogdana Carpenter)	1606
Luisa Valenzuela, <i>Novela negra con argentinos</i> (Kathleen N. March)	1607
Yevgeny Yevtushenko, <i>The Collected Poems 1952–1990</i> (Patricia Pollock Brodsky)	1608

1993

Blaga Dimitrova, <i>The Last Rock Eagle; Noshten dnevnik</i> (Yuri Vidov Karageorge)	1609
Guillermo Cabrera Infante, <i>Mea Cuba</i> (Will H. Corral)	1610
Patrick Chamoiseau, <i>Texaco</i> (Juris Silenieks)	1611
Lauris Edmond, <i>New and Selected Poems</i> (Bernard Gadd)	1612
Keri Hulme, <i>Strands</i> (Bernard Gadd)	1613
Diana Raznovich, <i>Mater erótica</i> (David William Foster)	1613

1994

Roddy Doyle, <i>Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha</i> (William Hutchings)	1614
Abdelkebir Khatibi, <i>Triptyque de Rabat</i> (J. D. Gauthier)	1615
Naguib Mahfouz, <i>Adrift on the Nile</i> (Ramzi N. Salti)	1615
Iris Murdoch, <i>The Green Knight</i> (Mona Knapp)	1616
Mo Yan, <i>Red Sorghum: A Novel of China</i> (Jeffrey C. Kinkley)	1617
Marguerite Yourcenar, <i>Conte bleu; Le premier soir; Maléfice</i> (John L. Brown)	1617

1995

- Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Le premier amour est toujours le dernier* (Nada Elia) 1618
- Yves Bonnefoy, *La vie errante* (Michael Bishop) 1619
- Denise Chávez, *Face of an Angel* (William Nericcio) 1620
- V. S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World* (Michael Thorpe) 1621
- Julio Ortega, *Ayacucho, Goodbye; Moscow's Gold: Two Novellas on Peruvian Politics and Violence* (Melvin S. Arrington Jr.) 1621
- Zinovy Zinik, *One-Way Ticket* (Arnold McMillin) 1622

1996

- Martin Amis, *The Information* (Carter Kaplan) . . . 1623
- Carlos Fuentes, *Diana, the Goddess Who Hunts Alone* (George R. McMurray) 1623
- Cees Nooteboom, *The Following Story* (Arie Staal) 1624
- José Saramago, *Ensaio sobre A Cegueira* (Richard A. Preto-Rodas) 1625
- Nathalie Sarraute, *Ici* (E. Nicole Meyer) 1626
- Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Invisible Allies* (Jerzy R. Krzyżanowski) 1626

1997

- Julian Barnes, *Cross Channel* (William Hutchings) 1627
- Calixthe Beyala, *Your Name Shall Be Tanga* (Adele King) 1628
- Sujata Bhatt, *Point No Point: Selected Poemse* (Sudeep Sen) 1628
- Joseph Brodsky, *So Forth* (Rosette C. Lamont) . . . 1629
- Louis-Philippe Dalembert, *Le crayon du bon Dieu n'a pas de gomme* (Hal Wylie) 1631
- Simon Tay, *Alien Asian* (Peter Nazareth) 1631

1998

- Ha Jin, *Under the Red Flag* (Fatima Wu) 1632
- Peter Handke, *In einer dunklen Nacht ging ich aus meinem stillen Haus* (Erich Wolfgang Skwara) 1633
- Anne Hébert, *Est-ce que je te déränge?* (Maria A. Green) 1633
- Amos Oz, *Panther in the Basement* (Michael Shuval) 1634

- Caryl Phillips, *The Nature of Blood* (Charles P. Sarvan) 1635
- Jaroslav Seifert, *The Poetry of Jaroslav Seifert* (E. J. Czerwinski) 1636

1999

- Béatrix Beck, *Guidée par le songe* (Gretchen Rous Besser) 1636
- Andrée Chedid, *Lucy: La femme verticale* (Judy Cochran) 1637
- Julio Cortázar, *Save Twilight/Salvo el crepúsculo: Selected Poems of Julio Cortázar* (Melvin S. Arrington Jr.) 1637
- Seamus Heaney, *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996* (William Pratt) 1638
- James Kelman, *The Good Times* (Peter Bien) . . . 1639
- Gisèle Pineau, *L'âme prêtée aux oiseaux* (Dayna Oscherwitz) 1639

2000

- Isabel Allende, *Hija de la fortuna* (Teresa R. Arrington) 1640
- Luigi Fontanella, *Terra del tempo e altri poemetti* (Giose Rimanelli) 1641
- Yasunari Kawabata, *First Snow on Fuji* (Erik R. Lofgren) 1642
- Frank McCourt, *'Tis* (Leslie Schenk) 1643
- Helen Meier, *Liebe Stimme* (Erlis Wickersham) 1644
- Rajendra Singh, *The Shirt of Flame* (Basavaraj Naikar) 1644

2001

- Aharon Appelfeld, *Kol Asher Ahavti* (Gila Ramras-Rauch) 1645
- Cyril Dabydeen, *My Brahmin Days and Other Stories* (Charles P. Sarvan) 1646
- Margaret Drabble, *The Peppered Moth* (Adma d'Heurle) 1646
- Edouard Glissant, *Sartorius: Le roman des Batutos* (A. James Arnold) 1648
- Czesław Miłosz, *To* (George Gömöri) 1648
- Gao Xingjian, *Soul Mountain* (Fatima Wu) 1649

Notes on Contributors 1651

Index 1665

Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Balkans

ALBANIA

Albanian Nationalism and Socialism in the Fiction of Ismail Kadare

Ismail Kadare (b. 1936) is the only modern Albanian writer who is known widely outside his own country. Although he writes both poetry and prose fiction, he is known primarily for the latter. Thematically, Kadare's fiction contains strains of Albanian nationalist thinking and of twentieth-century socialist thought. But Kadare avoids the idolatry of nationalism and socialism by disavowing the notion that the deeds of the traditional "old man" or of the socialist "new man" are sufficient, *independently*, to secure the well-being of the nation. The strengths of socialism must redeem the weaknesses of national traditions; and conversely, the virtues of national thought must overcome the imperfections of socialist practice. In Kadare's works collectively, the old national symbol is hence resurrected, but Kadare endows the two heads of the eagle with fresh significance and the eagle itself with unfamiliar vitality.

Of his numerous works, three are rich in Kadarean conceptions: the novel *Gjenerali i ushtrisë së vdekur* (The General of the Dead Army; 1963), the collection of short stories *Qyteti i jugut* (The Southern City; 1964) and the novel *Dasma* (The Wedding; 1968). In *Gjenerali* a nameless Italian general is sent to Albania by his government in order to recover the bones of Italian soldiers who had died and were buried there during World War II. A priest, also nameless, accompanies the general on his mission. These two are in an uncomfortable relationship: they dislike each other; only necessity binds them together. Although characterization of the men is sympathetic, what they symbolize is unlovable. While the general is a symbol of militarism, he is also more than that: he stands for Western attitudes toward life and love, the indestructible matters of human existence.

The priest epitomizes the religious support which is accorded Western views. In the general's precise and diligent search for the bones of dead men, and in the sad consequences of this search for himself—anxiety, insomnia, nightmares and alcoholism—Kadare wants us to discover a terrifying aspect of Western ways, namely, that these ways serve the forces of death, not life.

The life-promoting forces are found in Albanian character and in socialist action. As the general and his partner move from one locality to the next in their search for bones, they encounter Albanians of different ranks. In these encounters Kadare develops the contrast between the two antagonistic modes of thought and living; but he does not over-ideologize the distinction, for he never explicitly mentions socialism, capitalism or Westernism. Albanians are portrayed as vigorous, self-controlled, altruistic and proud in contrast to Westerners, who are debilitated, sexually lawless, selfish and greedy. Whatever vice exists among Albanians is imported.

Despite so much national commendation, however, *Gjenerali* is not a piece of nationalistic propaganda promoting the tired but attractive notion that the West is corrupt while Albania is pure. Kadare weakens the allure of this notion by showing that while vice is unevenly distributed, suffering is not. The wartime intruders and their descendants do not suffer any more on account of their corruption, nor do the Albanians suffer any less because of their virtue. One episode will suffice to support this point; the situation is recalled from the war years. Against the protest of local Albanians, the occupation sets up a bordello, run by foreign girls and patronized by the occupiers. A young Albanian, succumbing to the lure of the brothel, stains his and his family's reputation. The boy's father avenges the family by murdering the leading temptress. But the father is quickly apprehended and hanged within a few days for his act of revenge. He is not even given time to celebrate the manly pride which motivated his deed.

For all that, Western ways remain inherently punitive, for they spell the destruction of moral character, while Albanian ways remain life-promoting, because they sustain moral character. Thus, while Albanians too can count their dead, there is no Albanian equivalent of the demoralized, nameless General of the Dead Army. This idealistic picture of Albanian character starts to fade, however, in *Qyteti i jugut* and in *Dasma*. In these later works the foreign intruder is not so conspicuous; and in taking a more relaxed view of the character of Albanian society, Kadare uncovers indigenous, not imported, evils against which he warns his countrymen.

Katrina, the heroine of *Dasma*, is a peasant girl from the mountains. In accordance with the custom of arranged marriages, she was engaged at a young age and was expected from that time on to begin learning the skills which would prepare her to be a wife. However, the hopes of her father are disappointed several years later when the authorities send Katrina, along with other students, to southern Albania in order to work at a railroad camp. (The location is significant, for southern Albania has been regarded as more cultivated than the mountainous north, within whose formidable fastnesses the mountaineers have been able to preserve ancient customs. Not surprisingly, the Albanian Communist movement began in the south.) The trip to the south is Katrina's first encounter with the world outside her village. Her father opposes her exposure to this world, but the wishes of the local Party authorities overrule him.

In her new surroundings Katrina becomes acquainted with what she calls "paja e partisë" (the dowry of the Party), which does not involve clothes and linen, but freedom and knowledge for women. She begins to despise her background and to pity her father for his submission to a social system which relies for its survival upon conformity, violence and the oppression of women. Katrina breaks her engagement, and not long thereafter she falls in love with a young worker named Xheviti, who wishes to marry her. She consents; and through this independent course of action, she not only severs herself from her family, but also compromises her family's integrity: for since the traditional marriage is really a marriage of families, the moral failure of one individual affects many others. This is why, as the novel makes clear, the engagement period is frequently attended by the anxious hope of the negotiating parties that neither side will suffer the misfortune of moral failure or a breach of trust.

The wedding (*dasma*) of Katrina and Xheviti, a wedding which they have arranged themselves, is the central event of the novel. The guests include humble well-wishers, friends of the married couple, local Party

personnel and several intellectuals. The guests represent, in short, every stratum of Albanian culture. Through a series of subplots Kadare explores the character of relationships between the sexes in Albania. The novel is a condemnation of traditional marriage, its patriarchal basis and its indifference to the happiness of the young. It also attacks the matchmaking negotiations, which barter lives as though people were on a level no higher than that of sheep, donkeys and goats. Finally, the novel denounces the violence which is often used to avenge a serious breach of trust.

In Katrina's and Xheviti's case, trust has been breached, for the girl's parents had promised her to another. The tension pervading the novel arises from the unarticulated understanding of everyone that sooner or later a broken promise will be avenged. But the newlyweds are not afraid; they know that their personal rights are protected by the Party. The shades of tragedy which have clouded the marriage festivities materialize when the father and the matchmaker unexpectedly appear. In the dark woods near the wedding hall, they attack each other, then mysteriously disappear, "si dy përbindështa të plagosur" (like two wounded monsters), leaving drops of blood on the ground as evidence of their savage encounter. But the wedding joy is undiminished, and when the long celebration ends at daybreak, the sun rises on yet another couple to be married with their own consent in socialist Albania.

The message is clear: the old customs are vicious and will crumble under the weight of their own contradictions, without in the least hindering the establishment of more humane relationships between men and women.

In this message, are we hearing the voice of Kadare or the collective voice of the Albanian Labor (Communist) Party denouncing female bondage, patriarchalism and social conservatism? This is a legitimate question, for in *Dasma* the writer appears to have reversed the picture which emerged in *Gjenerali*. *Dasma's* picture of the suppression of women is the antithesis of *Gjenerali's* celebration of the purity and stability of male-female relationships. And the violent tendencies of Albanian men, deplored in *Dasma*, are either lauded in *Gjenerali* as examples of Albanian masculine pride, or else excused as excrescences alien to the true character of Albanians. The traditional Albanians in *Gjenerali* are portrayed as noble, while many of those in *Dasma* are pictured as ignoble. It is as though Kadare were describing two different peoples. But he is not. They are the same; it is the basis of evaluation which differs in the two novels. For in *Gjenerali* Albanians measure up well when they are compared against the militaristic and debilitated West, but these same Albanians are found