

Challenges of Albanian Literary Historiography

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ABSTRACT

Can our literary historiography remain hostage to the atypicality of Albanian literary developments? This is a question that can be less and less avoided. The way in which Albanian literature continues to be studied in our schools (see the historical wording itself: Renaissance Literature) encourages the need for a methodological discussion, which we can begin with the following statement: The study of everything related to history (of civilization), actually overshadows literary studies. Thus, the differences between what is and what is not literature are hidden; extra-literary criteria begin to be applied to literature and, consequently, literature will be considered valuable insofar as it draws conclusions about this or that discipline, which is close to it, because the identification of literature with history (of civilization) is a denial of the specific field and methods of studying literature. This paper aims to answer this question, but also others that arise during the discussion.

Keywords

Teaching literature, literary historiography, atypism, literary criteria/historical criteria, Albanian romanticism

Introduction

The fact that the challenges of our literary historiography are numerous is also indicated by the issues that arose when it faced the literature of the so-called National Renaissance. This period, the way it is studied in our schools and universities, seems at first sight, to some extent, more consolidated in terms of the list of its writers, than other literary periods – this is also debatable - but in terms of the way it is conducted, many questions continue to arise.

The main concern is that historiography continues to be completely related to history. It often seems that literary texts are closer to history than purely literary texts. Moreover, this mode of interpretation is used for all our literary periods, even though they are not in the vein of romanticism, by causing disorientation to the true knowledge of literature.

After the new literary works, previously banned in Albania for non-literary reasons or those literary works that have the aesthetic value to be (re)read by current generations, became part of the dynamic system of the tradition, the history of literature cannot be an immutable data. The state of development of literary studies in the world and in the country constitute a new starting point, once we agree that another tradition is created in this period of freedom to pursue theoretical studies, since we neither use the exclusionary ideological criterion nor attempt to explain the history of literature with social history.

Such an upheaval of traditional literary historiographic thought certainly brings us back to the original question about literature. We know that, at first glance, on the basis of a widely held knowledge, the question of what is poetry (in the case of our study), because it dominates the subject under consideration, we could answer: it can be many things - philosophical, emotional or sentimental - it can give a picture or tell a story, it can be satirical, entertaining, political or simply informative, but this answer is not satisfactorily because none of these characteristics is poetry itself, and it does not reveal how it differs from other types of writing or speaking.

While a study aimed at the issue of Albanian literature in the spirit of modern literary theories, as Literary History, a field not developed adequately in Albanian studies, is deemed indispensable, now the object of our study is defined more clearly than ever: Do we accept this literature as Albanian romanticism?

Since in the modern science of literature, romanticism is mainly viewed in two perspectives: as an *artistic method*, based on the transformation of reality into art; *as a literary direction*, historically limited in time, we immediately pose the question: should we study romantic literature? Through the creative method, based on the reflection of reality according to the writer's often wild imagination and fantasy, by showing us the idea of expression that replaces mimesis?

- From the point of view of the aesthetic program, with special features of the work's poetics, bearing in mind the notion of *literary direction*, historically placed in time?

However, the two issues mentioned above appear to be strongly connected: they are separated by the term timeless, which is necessary for the second one. Accepting this would pave the way for how to face the legacy of romanticism as a *literary current*, of political-social-philosophical thought, with its unjustified superiority in our studies and textbooks, to convince ourselves that the above-mentioned problems come from this kind of study, used even without the respective term romanticism, and chaotic or nonsensical narratives.

A clarity about methodology at the very start should therefore make the questions easier for us: What did romanticism bring in Albanian literature? Which literary works are romantic? What were its models? Which is the place of romanticism in Albanian literature? How was it viewed by traditional scholars and how is it viewed by scholars nowadays? How was our national literature created? Is there any more space for atypical ideas of interpretation?

Before elaborating the mosaic that aims to outline the historical - cultural context in which Albanian romanticism was born and formed as a branch of political-social thought, we bring to attention that that until today, its presentation has been the main one in our studies and part of teaching in universities, therefore we can consult widely literature about it. The university texts compiled so far, *History of Albanian Literature* 1. 11. (Tirana 1959, 1960) and *History of Albanian Literature* (Tirana 1983) have more or less this content organization:

- views on the historical - social circumstances of the ages whose literature is examined;
- some views on cultural life and on the most general features of literature; placement of authors, presented in

Undoubtedly, this scheme does not enable an insight in the phenomenon studied and its special features, that is, those characteristics that distinguish it from other similar fields of spiritual life. What is most important, it limits the possibilities to view literature as a process, with its own laws. By following mainly the criterion of describing literature as a given historical period, the texts in question, more than history, seem to be a chronology of people who created literature.

Even today, we know that the acceptance of major literary directions in literary studies is not easy, when modern literary theories, formalism for example, considers them "big labels, general and incomprehensible notions" and for structuralism, which is interested only in the text as such, while the time when this text was written, and even its author, are not of primary importance. Modern literary theories seek to draw attention to the artistic "loss" that is hidden after big labels of literary currents or directions, reinforcing the idea that literary art is "language". This is worth emphasizing even more, when considering that this study deals with poetry, since prose and drama present more modest values in relation to it.

The whole system remains open and welcomes what is "lost". As Albanian poet Asdren stated:

- Policies and ideologies are temporary, while the literary system self-operates continuously.

The expected reception horizon for the literary work is delayed continuously, because the points of view shift. For example, Byron, who was adored by Goethe and other romanticists, was viewed differently by T.S Eliot's generation, who, after praising his ability to narrate, according to him: *he adds nothing to language, does not reveal anything with the sound, does not develop anything in the meaning of individual words.*¹

Eliot adds that, when the poet gains a large mass of admirers for a short time, it is a rather doubtful case, for it leads us to fear that he is not doing anything new, but merely offering to the people what they are taught with, that is, what they had from the poets of the previous generation.²

Naturally, the question arises: what are the sustainable values, which exceed the museum values of Albanian romanticism?³

¹ See T.S. Eliot, *Selected Essays*, Prishtina, Kosovë: Rilindja Publishing House, 1982, pp. 212

² Ibid, pp. 67

³ The concept of *Literary History* continues to require the identification of some of its basic features such as: - The purpose of the internal approach is to determine the forces that act, lead, set tasks or find expression in literary texts - what makes them what they are - as well as of the ways in which these aspects affect literature; in contrast to the traditional history of literature, literary history was seen not simply as a chaotic collection of texts in arbitrary relation to each other, but as a listing of moments or sequences that form together a coherent and persuading narrative; - By providing an insight on external events, while seeking the formula of a view of literature in the course of time, literary history subordinates history to literature; without the development of literary theory, there is no literary history. (See Lee Patterson, *Literary History* in "Critical terms for literary study" : University of

To answer this question,

- Firstly, we have to define the boundaries of the periodization of this literary current: Secondly, we have to define a poetics that would summarize the main features of the texts that we must list as part of Albanian romanticism.

But, even before this, we have to accept the very idea of this literary current.

Discussions

Can our literary historiography remain stuck to the atypicality of Albanian literary developments?

This is a question that can be avoided less and less.

But what drives the concern that requires a shift of the atypical view of Albanian literature? The way in which Albanian literature continues to be studied in our schools - it is revealing if one just notes the historical formulation itself: *Literature of the Renaissance* - prompts the need for a methodological discussion, we would like to start with the following statement:⁴

- *The study of everything related to the history (of civilization) actually decreases the importance of literary studies. The differences between what is literature and what is not literature are thus obliterated; extra-literary criteria begin to be applied to literature and, therefore, literature is considered valuable insofar it provides conclusions for this or that discipline that is close to it, identifying literature with history (of civilization) constitutes a denial of the specific field and specific methods of studying literature.*⁵

The concern we raise has existed for several decades. Due to the need to put order and create a system in the study of literature, the researcher Namik Resuli, the compiler of the series *Albanian Writers*,⁶ wrote his platform, before this book was published:

- *None of the literary works that are written until now on the history of Albanian literature, both in our language and in foreign languages, have not made any systematic and reasoned division of the subject that they intended to study. The truth is that none of these foreign or Albanian authors had the intention of studying deeply only from the literary point of view the history of our literature, nor did they care about its classification.*⁷

This is how he viewed the cause of the failure of these works *generally fabricated without scientific criteria and consisting of a dry enumeration of facts and dates, which are of no importance the way they are listed.*

But history proved to be stronger than one could think, because even Resuli himself used a historical political date, when he demanded that Albanian literature be divided into: 1. *Literary production before the League of Prizren* 2. *Literary production after the League of Prizren*. He thought that only the second group was worth studying. By linking the value of the publications to the spread that occurred after the *Society of Istanbul* (1879), the reasons presented for the downfall of the first group revolved around the idea that:

(1) Cultural circles operate in isolation from each other.

(2) A utilitarian literature is written, for the needs of faith in the Christian groups, or, mainly, for entertainment, satire and didacticism in the Muslim group.

In order to oppose Resuli's ideas we provide the following arguments:

- One work, even discovered late, is enough to shift the entire value system of a language

- A utilitarian work is not said to be devoid of art because:

- within such texts lie literary genres and forms and we can enjoy reading, while they give us the "present" of literature, according to the Russian formalists;⁸

Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 250; and Keith Green & Jill LeBihan, *Critical theory & practice*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 102)

⁴ See also Gazmend Krasniqi, *Modernism and postmodernism in literature*. Jozef. Durrës 2021.

⁵ Rene Wellek & Warren, Austin. *Theory of Literature*, Tirana: Enciklopedike Publishing House, 1993.

⁶ Albanian Writers, 2. Second Edition, Tirana: Pakti Publishing House, 2008.

⁷ Namik Resuli, *For a Systemic Classification of Albanian Literature*, Newspaper, National School.

⁸ In fact, the researcher Resuli himself gives us some arguments to oppose the devaluation of old literature, when he says (Enver Muhametaj, *Albanian Literary Thought 1939-1944*, 7, Tirana: Center of Albanian Studies; Institute of Linguistics and Literature. Albanian World, 2008, p. 13): "These old writers of Albania's North are not only the first to initiate a certain cultural movement in their country, they are not only the ones who gave Albanians an alphabet - the Latin alphabet - but they are also the first ones to think and work, cry and suffer for their homeland and their language, for Albanian and Albania. Even from this national point of view, this literary

- as it is said in popular art histories, while we are eating with a wooden spoon, i.e. we are using a utilitarian tool, we can first admire it aesthetically.

As we know, the publication of the series *Albanian Writers* did not realize the idea why it was initiated:

- *to study deeply the history of our literature only from a literary point of view. Even this cannot be called the history of Albanian literature, admits Ernest Koliqi, the supervisor of the publication. If each writer or constellation of authors, each current or school of writing, is never studied, it is very difficult to reach the goal of having a precise synthesis, a panoramic framework, a convincing history that shows the flow of our river of literature during one hundred years, enriched with unknown rains and streams, springs and streamlets.*

Perhaps the argument of “failure” can be found more clearly in the words of Karl Gurakuqi, who was one of the strong supporters of this publication:

- *This volume summarized the so-called writers of the Renaissance, most of whom, a few years ago, held a rifle in their hands and a book under their armpit, and spread the idea of a free Albania. Many of them devoted themselves to Albanian letters more strongly with an external purpose; they took into account the national apostolate - as the need of the homeland was at that time - rather than art, therefore their value, generally speaking, is relative and they always connected it to the history of national awakening.*⁹

Even the concept of Arshi Pipa in 1971, is similar to the concept of Resuli¹⁰, when he makes this classification:¹¹

1. *The cultural mosaic of the pre-national period: 1555-1881.* 2. *The romantic literature of the National Renaissance: (1836) 1881-1912 (1924). Utilization of terms: “Early Northern Ecclesiastic Catholic Writers, Early Ecclesiastic Greek-Orthodox Italian-Arberesh¹² Writers, Arabic-Alphabet Muslim Writers, Greek-Alphabet Diaspora Orthodox Writers, Arberesh of Calabria and Arberesh of Sicily Writers, Secular and Clerical Writers, bourgeois ideologues and democratic-populist writers.* As it can be noticed, this classification is similar also to the aforementioned concept of the “Albanian Writers” publication.¹³

Acceptance of the term “Romanticism”

There is an article published in 1944 “Romanticism in Albania”, which we do not know if it was ever taken into consideration, although its author has no doubt that this literary direction (he calls it and elaborates on it as a *current*) has occupied the center in Albanian literature:

production could be directly related to what came after the League of Prizren... We can list these arguments this way: If we take the poem “Pious Song” by Lekë Matrënga, it is not said to answer the call to church to enjoy it. If there were doubts about poems like this, it would be enough to mention the poem “Milosao” by Jeronim De Rada.

⁹ *Albanian Writers*. 2. Second edition, Tirana: Pakti Publishing House, 2008, pp. 360

¹⁰ For the sake of truth, he had not required the removal of the Old Literature, simply had supported the idea that the only national literature could be studied as literature. In his article published in “The National School” newspaper, he clarified these ideas, in a polemic with those who accused him. (Enver Muhametaj, *Albanian literary thought 1939-1944*, Center of Albanian Studies, Tirana: Institute of Linguistics and Literature. Albanian World Publishing House, 2008, *Polemics with Filip Fishta*).

¹¹Classification 1: The cultural mosaic of the pre-national period: 1555-1881 - 1a. Early Northern Ecclesiastic Roman Catholic Writers: Doctrinal and Linguistic Works (mid 16th - early 18th century) 1b. Early Ecclesiastic Greek-Orthodox, Italian-Arberesh Writers, Early Ecclesiastic Greek - Italian Orthodox - Arberesh writers: doctrinal and didactic works (end of the 16th century - end of the 18th century) 1c. Muslim writers writing with the Arabic alphabet: erotic, satirical and didactic poetry (beginning of the 18th century - beginning of the 19th century) 1. Orthodox writers of the diaspora writing with the Greek alphabet: lexicography, folklore collection and translation of the Bible (19th century) 2. Romantic literature of the National Renaissance: (1836) 1881-1912 (1924) 2a. Arberesh romanticism: Arberesh of Calabria and Arberesh of Sicily (1836-1924) 2b. Shkodra romanticism: secular and clerical writers (1881-1924) 2c. Romantic literature in exile: bourgeois ideologues and democratic-populist writers (1886-1924) (Arshi Pipa, *Albanian Literature*, Tirana: Social Perspective. Princi Publishing House, 2013).

¹² The Arberesh are an ethnolinguistic group of Christian Albanians who have had roots in southern Italy for hundreds of years and are scattered throughout mountainous areas in the southern Italian regions of Abruzzi, Molise, Puglia, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria and Sicily.

¹³ Let us not forget that Pipa’s work is titled *Albanian Literature: Social Perspectives*, and that is the reason why it is easier for him to make these classifications.

- *Romanticism is the only literary direction we had and still have. This literary current emerged as a literary-patriotic action. It was developed as such. It took quite large forms: it became the only literature of our country. Even after Albania overcame the political crisis and won national independence, we continued in this direction.*¹⁴

In 1945, in the work *Romanticism in Eastern and Southwestern Europe and in Albanian literature*, authored by Eqrem Çabej had put forward the idea that the literature of the National Renaissance can be considered Albanian Romanticism, but the birth of the doctrine of Socialist Realism, under the Soviet influence, had other ideas that were reflected in two works that were published in this period (1960 and 1983), by the respective state institutions.

In Kosovo, Academic Rexhep Qosja published the study *From Typology to Periodization*, which in the title accepts that the different periods of literary development named with literary terminology, by singling a different approach. Again in Kosovo, in the book *Albanian literary schools*, Academic Sabri Hamiti defines the Literature of Renaissance as the *romantic school*, defining it as *literature on a personal and collective level, where discourse owes a lot to the purpose and function of the text*,¹⁵ where the dominant literary forms are the personalized lyrics and poems with synthesizing claims or narrative power and heroic argument, with which the development of the national epic is aimed and the text takes on the character of deification, either for powerful personal expressions or for large national projections.¹⁶ It draws attention the fact that some poets, who for us belong to romantic inspirations, are included in the school that the researcher clearly names *the criticism school*. Personalities such as Zef Skiroi, Ndre Mjedja, Gjergj Fishta and Çajupi keep the discussion open, as this is how the idea of the atypical development of Albanian literature is protected,¹⁷ when we recall that this approximate scheme was consolidated in Western studies.

Renaissance,
Baroque,
Neoclassicism,
Romanticism,
Realism,
Modernism and
Postmodernism.¹⁸

In order to reinforce the ideas that emerge from the above picture of developments in Albanian Literature, we have to recall that Faik Konica had elaborated since 1906¹⁹ the relations art - ideology, literature - ideology (that is, art separated from ideology²⁰); while Asdreni addressed six years later, the relationship between literature and politics, by stating that there are cases when literature and politics go together, such is this moment of the Renaissance or Albanian romanticism, but there comes a moment when each follows its own path.²¹

It is important to note that this article of Asdren was used in Albanian studies with a different meaning: the part that they are to be separated is not mentioned, but only their existence “side by side”,²² which, of course, resembles manipulation over years in Albania of politics, ideology and literary thought itself.

After all the consequences that are ascertained in our recent literary studies, we have the right to pose the questions:

- If we refer only to documents and texts in a language, in the prism of the ideas of that language does it limit the discussion?²³

¹⁴ Enver Muhametaj, *Albanian Literary Thought 1939-1944*, Tirana: Centre of Albanological Studies; Institute of Language and Literature. Bota shqiptare Publishing House, 2008, pp 41. A further elaboration of the point of views of the article.

¹⁵ Sabri Hamiti, *Albanian Literary School*, Prishtina, Kosovë: Faik Konica, 2004, pp. 13

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 13-14.

¹⁷ In Yves Chevrel, *Letërsia e krahasuar*, Tiranë: Albin. 2002, Literary directions of the western literature are presented similarly in this order.

¹⁸ Rene Wellek, & Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, Tirana: Enciklopedike Publishing House, 1993, and Yves Chevrel, *Letërsia e krahasuar*, Tiranë: Albin, 2002

¹⁹ See interpretations of Ibrahim Rugova in the book *Directons and Premises of Albanian Literay Criticism 1504-1983*”.

²⁰ It has to be noted that Academic Sabri Hamiti demonstrated constantly that he is clear about this issue.

²¹ Floresha Dado, *Intuition and Criticism Consciousness*, Tiranë: Onufri Publishing House. 2006, pp. 71.

²² *History of Albanian Literature II*, Tirana 1960, pp. 488

²³ See Rene Welle & Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* Tirana: Enciklopedike Publishing House, 1993 pp. 44-45

- Does it mix the issue being discussed with nationalistic or regional feelings, without a proper theoretical clarity?

Only when we accept that the connections between literature as a whole and national literature must be mutual, we can point out:

- How common features of European literary thought can appear differently in different countries:
- How each country has its own radiating centers of gravity, its own outstanding artists, who deviate from the common path and distinguish one national tradition from another.

It is true that in the past history mixed with literature and philosophy, colored with patriotism and partiality, had little chances to become a science, but nowadays this discipline is at a different stage. As we know since the time of Aristotle, according to whom, the real difference between history and poetry lies in the fact that the first happened, while the second could have happened, therefore literature is more philosophical, higher: literature expresses the universal, while history expresses the partial.

Consequently, they cannot be studied in the same way, and this seems to be the answer to the question we posed. So, every literature reflects on the one hand the laws that originate from the peculiarities of the traditions and conditions of the country, while on the other hand it reflects laws of a general character that are determined by the character of inter-literary processes.

But nowadays, it is not important only to separate literature from history, at a time when theory or science of literature is developed and numerous literary theorists have questioned two major romantic perceptions:

- the one that the literary text is a living, special and individualized “organism”;
- the one that the artist is an extremely independent genius who creates original works of art.

According to the current theory, the particular and “living” work is dissolved in a sea of “intertextuality”, which derives from/and is part of a network or “archive” of other texts - different kinds of discourses, parts of different cultures, while the sovereign artist has degraded from a heroic actor of creative consciousness, to a collective “voice”, rather controlled than controlling, in the point of intersection with other voices, other texts, dependent on the possibilities dictated by systems, conventions and language structures.

Having this kind of approach, researchers agree that we need to view history *not as a document, but as a monument*. The science of literature, according to Roland Barthes: “cannot be a science of contents (which can only be studied by historical science in the narrow sense of the word), but a science of the conditions of the contents, namely of the forms.”²⁴

Conclusions

In this paper, we argued that in Albanian culture there still exists the issue of how to write literary historiography. We also reasoned and evidenced that the problems of the tradition of historiography today, in the time of the developments of modern literary theories, can be viewed as outdone.

Nowadays, it is indispensable to separate history as a specific discipline in general and on the other side the interliterary processes in particular.

The exclusionary ideological criterion or the attempt to seek an explanation of the history of literature with social history, a characteristic of the period of Socialist Realism, is of no use.

Finally, according to the most prominent modern theorists, one can't ignore the idea that the science of literature cannot be a science of contents (which can only be studied by historical science in the narrow sense of the word), but a science of the conditions of the contents, namely, its forms.

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²⁴ Roland Barthes, *Semiologic Adventure*, Prishtina, Kosovë: Rilindja Publishing House, 1987, pp. 223.

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