

The Chaotic Course of Albanian Literature

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I have been trying for some time to think of something coherent to say about Albanian literature and its current state. I am now sure if I have succeeded. It is somehow not a coherent subject.

Some of you may know something about Albanian literature, but I suspect there are many here, even from the neighbouring countries, who do not anything about it. So let me start with a brief overview of the historical development of creative writing in Albanian.

There has been writing in Albanian for about five centuries. The first Albanian-language book, the Catholic Missal of Gjon Bukuzu, dates from 1555. However, writing in Albanian remained sporadic until the twentieth century. The nationalist movement, which advanced Albanian national identity and promoted the use of the Albanian language, arose in the late nineteenth century while the country was still an integral part of the Ottoman Empire. The main reasons for a lack of much literature in this period was the Ottoman ban on writing and education in Albanian. While the Christian peoples of the Balkans, the Bulgarians, the Greeks and the Serbs, had gained much cultural autonomy within the Empire and had schools and publications in their own languages, the Albanians, who were Muslim in their majority, were considered by the Sublime Porte to be Turks, and did not have the same freedom.

The aristocratic publicist Ekrem bey Vlora (1885-1964) reported on a house search in April 1903: “The result was meager. One postcard written in Albanian was found in a lady’s dress. This earth-shattering discovery led to the banishment and incarceration of eighty notables in the Vlora region.”¹ The prison in Vlora was said to be full of offenders having possessed writing in Albanian. “Some five hundred people are crammed into this narrow windowless room with no flooring. Most of them were supporters of the so-called national idea and were thus guilty of high treason. The judge, an Albanian himself, told me in the presence of several Turkish officials: ‘Yes, we do have some murderers and thieves among them, but they are of less importance. Our attention is concentrated more on offenders found in possession of papers written in Albanian’.”²

As such, there was very little writing and publishing, and little education in Albanian until after independence in 1912 and, in particular, until the country’s consolidation after the Congress of Lushnja in 1920.

From that time onwards, however, things evolved swiftly. Albanian became the language of the administration, of schools, of publishing and of creative writing throughout the country. I am referring, of course, to the Albanians living within the borders of the new state. Kosovo, which was

¹ Ekrem bey Vlora, *Aus Berat und vom Tomor: Tagebuchblätter* (Sarajevo 1911), p. 39.

² *ibid*, p. 68

invaded and conquered by Serbian forces in 1912 against the will of the population, went from the forced usage of Turkish to the forced usage of Serbian. There, creative literature in Albanian only began in the 1960s.

Albanian literature flourished in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, I have called the 1930s the “golden age” of Albanian literature. Among the classic writers of the period, many of whom were from Shkodra in the north, were the Franciscan priest Gjergj Fishta (1871-1940), author of the 15,000-line national epic “The Highland Lute”; the prose writer and public figure Ernest Koliqi (1903-1975); the poet and prose writer Migjeni, who broke down the barriers of romantic nationalism in Albanian writing but who died at an early age; and Lasgush Poradeci (1899-1987), the sublime bard of Lake Ohrid. Numerous literary periodicals of high quality came to make their appearance, too – better than any literary periodicals published since that time, even to this present day!

Then came the apocalypse – the communist takeover of Albania in 1944 and the radical destruction of what was regarded as bourgeois culture. Many writers and publishers were arrested and imprisoned, interned or executed; many fled abroad to Italy; and a few remained in the country and tried in vain to come to terms with the ruthless and brutal regime that was to hold sway for the next half a century. Albanian literature was wiped out and had to begin from scratch, draped in the new garb of social realism.

No literature worth mentioning was produced again in Albania until the 1960s. It was only then that a few leading authors, like Fatos Arapi (b. 1930), Dritëro Agolli (b. 1931) and Ismail Kadare (b. 1936), created works that went beyond the usual partisan drivel that the Albanian public was so tired of. They were extremely cautious, but they did manage to push the boundaries a little and to produce and publish works of acceptable literary quality.

Albanian literature continued to evolve in the 1970s and 1980s, though in a socialist realism corset and with much censorship and self-censorship. Creative literature also flourished in Kosovo for the first time in this period. With the founding in 1970 of the University of Prishtina as an Albanian-language institution of higher learning, and with the Yugoslav Constitution of 1974 that gave the people of Kosovo a large degree of self-determination, literature and publishing evolved as never before. It was a different literature, not always of high quality, but without the severe ideological constraints of publishing in Albania.

What should not be forgotten in this connection is that there was very little cultural exchange between Albania and Kosovo until the mid 1990s. Very few books published in Kosovo got into Albania and very few books published in Albania got into Kosovo, so essentially there were two different Albanian literatures. The border between the two countries was tightly sealed by the two regimes, and very few writers had contact with their counterparts the other side, “over the mountains,” as they said. Indeed, the Serbian occupation authorities continued to impose a special exit visa for Kosovo Albanians long after communism had collapsed in both countries. This visa, for Kosovo Albanians travelling to Albania, was usually denied and those who ignored it were punished. I remember a professor of modern literature at the University of Prishtina being sentenced to prison in Kosovo for attending a literature conference in which I took part in Tirana in 1993.

What can be said of literature after the fall of communism in Albania in 1989-1990? The dictatorship essentially imploded and communism was replaced by a market economic – the Wild West. There was no more political censorship, but there were no more quality controls in publishing. Private publishing companies arose very quickly, some of them funded by dubious sources, and anyone who had money or influence could publish whatever he or she wanted. By the mid-1990s, huge numbers of books were being published and sold in real bookstores, rather than on overturned boxes in the street.

However, as there has never been a tradition of reliable literary criticism in the country, Albanian readers, although delighted by the number of books available, were disoriented by what they found on the market. Accordingly, it is easy to understand that, for the last 25 years, readers have largely turned away from their own authors and devoted their free time to translations of Western literature. Few works of Albanian literature, with the notable exception of Ismail Kadare, ever sold more than 100 copies. It is often said that Albania is a country with more writers than readers, and this is a particularly frustrating situation for young creative talents.

In Kosovo, literature largely subsided in the second half of the 1990s. Radio and television were closed down by the Serbian authorities, as were the university and Albanian-language schools. No newspapers were allowed, with the curious exception of a newspaper called *The Farmer (Bujku)* which somehow got by the censors. On the other hand, there was no more active censorship of creative literature, as the authorities in Belgrade probably didn't care what Albanians were writing and reading. Many writers fled abroad so as not to become targets of Serbian revenge, but many also left out of pure economic necessity. They had been deprived of their livelihood and had no choice but to emigrate to Switzerland, Germany or even Albania.

What is the situation of Albanian literature in the last ten to fifteen years? It is difficult to say anything coherent about the currents of Albanian writing themselves. They are certainly reflections of Albanian society and the many problems it faces in Albania and Kosovo. This society is now diverse and chaotic, as is its literature, and I am not sure that I can comment on this at all.

As to production in quantity, about 3,000 books are now published in Albania every year. Of these, about 750 can be considered works of Albanian literature, approximately half of which are volumes of poetry. For 2015, for instance, we have 755 works of Albanian literature, comprising 349 volumes of poetry, 140 novels, 70 volumes of short stories, 17 volumes of essays, 45 volumes of children's literature, and 10 volumes of folk literature (mainly folk tales). In the same year, 635 works of foreign literature were translated into Albanian. The statistics for 2014 and 2013 are very similar.³ It can thus be seen that poetry remains predominant, just as it was under the communist dictatorship. Nothing has changed in this respect, except that a much larger proportion of the poets and prose writers are now female. Indeed, women writers are now among the best in the country, which was certainly not the case 20 years ago.

Positive is the fact that there are more books being published in Albanian than ever before and that the Albanian people have unprecedented access to uncensored information. Secondly, and equally important in my view, there are no more impediments to cultural exchange between Albania and Kosovo. Books, writers and publishers are free to come and go as they will. The two Albanian

³ Statistics provided by the National Library of Albania and provided by the Albanian Ministry of Culture.

peoples, if I may call them that, are swiftly becoming one nation with a common identity and a common literary culture.

Thank you.

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