At the Borders between Islam and Christianity: A Modern Reading on an Identity Cycle in Albanian Literature

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Abstract

Albanian literature, as randomly happens with the literature of small countries, can be defined closely related to the internal cultural processes of identity cultivation. The Albanian case, moreover, relates the specific nature of this literature, as the border literature between the two main religious, cultural and political entities: Christianity and Islam. There have continually been identity crashes and identity reformatting processes, yet building a core of incomparable identity with no other European country where every similar conglomerate is unimaginable. We have tried to explore the nature of this platform as a cyclical process over time through its appearances in the texts of Ismail Kadare (The Bringer of Misfortune) and Ben Blush (Living on an Island), based on a hybrid reading model Eco (Umberto) - Fish (Stanley), through The Possible Reader, as a kind of structuralist and phenomenological compromise. The discovery of the syntony/asyntony relationship of the structural meaning of texts with a Dominant Meaning Matrix in today's Albanian literature helps to understand the poetic contours produced by one of the most important integrals influencing the respective literature, that of Identity which has conditioned the Albanian literature, as much as being itself its aftereffect, under the conditions of an exceptionally institutional role of literature relatively unknown in the Balkan and European cultural context.

Keywords: Albanian literature, the possible reader, literature border, Islam, Christianity, identity

1. Introduction

Albanian literature was born as a literature border. In time, its first text, Meshari (The Missal) appears in 1555 between Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation or The Catholic Revival as their direct consequence and disappears in the eve of mass conversion in Islam which has reached its peak at the beginning of the XVII century, to reappear at the beginning of the 20th century when Albanian Renaissance primarily turned its attention toward the Albanian identity issues.

This cultural tension between East and West, Islam and Christianity has associated Albanian literature (Çabej, 1994), despite relatively liberal and dogmatic periods (i.e. socialist realism) in its history. Generally speaking, the identity of this literature is constructed on a narrow ground where East and West, Islam and Christianity, coexist, advance, and reverse each other by centenaries.

But how has this process of identity shifting defined during the last decades the internal process of Albanian literature, especially the prose fiction? What structural changes have been produced by the *Possible Reader*[1] for some of the texts

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[1] *Eco's model was chosen mainly for structural accomplishment of the text. That model formulates in poetical terms what happens between the text and the reader in time. Eco sees its meaning to be closed in interpretative relations text-reader, where the first's status remaining objective is, in the same time, open to the reader cooperation, who tries a number of interpretative choices, which even though being textually limited, still remains not exactly defined within a semantic model in the form of an encyclopedia, which fulfills the conditions for a textual pragmatism. It removes the meaning from the textual frame to offer a moving model, where meaning is not discovered, but materialized in the reader-text relation. The reader takes part in the form of using a encyclopedia, through which a possible view of the text can be build. Fish, also, explain that undoubtedly the words are meaningful or that the reader isn't free from the textual constrains. The kind of experience allowed from the text is controlled from linguistic and literary competence of the individual reader. The reader reacts in a way not in another to words because he acts supported by the same rules used by the author to generate them – at this point Fish reuses the gist of the interactive activity of the reader according to Eco. For both of them meaning isn't anymore a feature of the literary text, but a product of the reader's activity, forced and limited from the text. The question looking for an answer isn't what is the meaning of the text but how do the readers make the meaning in time? From this point of view Eco's time meaning appears as a function of the reader's competence under the constrains of the text to take interpretative decisions to construct a structure, which for Fish meaning is an*

involved, entirely on issues of identity? In this regard, can we speak of a phenomenon of specific weight, visible to today's Albanian prose, in a relatively complicated context of cultural, global, and local encounters?

2. Methodology and Background of the Phenomena: Is *Identity* a Main Issue for Today's Albanian literature?

In order to discover a possible structural dynamics because of psycho-cultural identity reasons, we have tried to construct an explaining context over the nature of the basic processes in today's Albanian prose. Further, we have tried to study their connection to a possible *Identity* platform. We have compared the objects obtained from Text-Possible Reader interaction (Xhindi 2015), in two representative cases, based on the Possible Reader's actions, as a critical instrument through an interval when the socialist realism literature was surpassed by the new literature of '90s.

Our point of view is that any structural change is *of value* when perceived as such; therefore, more precisely we are consistent with the judgment of a potential contemporary reader.

In constructing a descriptive view on the nature of today's Albanian prose, we think that there is a hierarchy of issues: *firstly*, the question of the prose relationship of this period to the previous one, respectively the socialist realism; *secondly*, the question of the physiognomy which the somewhat structured tendencies of today's prose are represented, in relation either to the previous structural influences or to the various constraints imposed by a new relationship regime; and *finally*, the corresponding critical reflection on new tendencies.

We can rely on the views of some of the most important voices of Albanian theoretic and literary criticism: Prof. Dado (Dado, 2007) notes that, in relation to the previous period: "the '90s literature relations generally involve a conflict, an opposing position". The reason, according to Dado (Dado, 2007), lies in: "…the fact that through new and effective aesthetic-emotional forms is aimed an another type of freedom in the content and in the artistic illusion of the relationship between our human reality and the convective ways of its imagination.

The conception of relations between the *reality* and *imaginary* has shown that in the literature of these years, the dominant tendency of the overwhelming majority of writers, especially novelists, is more a reaction to the tradition than the influence from its forms. To the younger authors this reaction appears more aggressive, to the extravagance of artistic structures. It is known that Modernism and Postmodernism as two sides of Modernity (where the phenomenon of opposition to traditional forms appears not only and simply as opposing, but also as a challenge to new structural shapes) become attractive aesthetic programs for many of the authors of these years".

Critics generally believe that the artistic identification process of authors who wrote after the 90s has come more than a normal personal evolution as *a reaction to traditional ideologies and of relevant artistic structures*, which has led to some kind of aesthetic radicalization, sometimes displayed as their only creation purpose (Hamiti, 2002): "What would literature do in a new context, that literature so much constrained by socio-political contexts and social structures…? It will take a paradoxically inverse direction. In Albania, this literature which invented the assertion of collective freedom now finds this plot in his body and quickly seeks compensation by creating a new plot, of the new Absolute, for the freedom of the individual".

This program – it can be defined as a 'program' - essentially individualist, would integrate various creative profiles, often "genetically" opposite. Dado (2007) notes that: "the freedom of creation as expression of individual freedom came as an undeniable occurrence, but also bearing a series of problems that create this tendency towards the new forms and ways of artistic creation. The Albanian prose was involved in various new tendencies, of symbolism and existentialism types, etc., but not rarely in unspecified directions, where it is difficult to follow the specifics of the author's artistic vision. Of course, this is a normal occurrence when authors are in the process of artistic creation".

Dado (2007) says that: "the writers of new generation tended towards to another conception and sensitivity, both in tackled problems and in structural visionary, in the deeply allegorical way of artistic evocation. Being a generation that didn't create in the period of socialist realism, this group of young people tended to deny the preceding literature and with their works aim to bring about a completely different literature that didn't simply oppose the literary tradition of the second half of the

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order of preliminary impulses motivated by text's signals and which in Fish's practice can be interpreted. The meaning to Eco is a structural function of the text, while to Fish it is a function, if it can be defined this way, pre-structural, an immediate impulse, meaning of the first level. The models have compatibility in spite of the debate about text centrism.

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XX century but had to prove that a new generation was bringing in a different literature, influenced by the modernist literature of the century, which the relationship between reality and artistic fiction doesn't envision as realistic literature".

3. Modernism as a New Unifying Feature

Important names of Albanian Literary Criticism are involved on this issue: Prof. Qose (2006) asserts that: "… in criticism and in general in literary science today is being dealt the issue of the relation between realism and modernism, videlicet between tradition and the novel, which in the literature and the literary criticism of the European peoples or even in the Balkans peoples was dealt with at the beginning of the 20th century. XX - in the first case, and after the Second World War - in the second case".

More specifically, Dado (2007) notes that: "The interpretation of literature of this decennia should also be directed in finding the trends of literature dynamics regarding the stylistics formats, where literature appears to have manifested a variety of structures and artistic conventions. What is happening to the Albanian literary process when the denial of the literature of socialist realism brought freedom of creation without restrictions? In general the period in question is defined by critical opinion as a period where the poetics of modernism is ruling (dado 2007): "Researches in the field of narration, in terms of the inner and outer structure of the text, in modernist elements of poetics, are associated in the literature of the last 15 years not just dealing with the realities of the dictatorship period, but also with the utmost insights: in the essence of man, in the problems of his existence". This phenomenon pervades works of I. Kadare, F. Kongoli, V. Koreshi, Zela Cela, A. Tufa, V. Graçi, A. Leka.

This stage of integration, in view of the respective trend towards a modernist poetics, is seen mostly as a result of a spontaneous process (Jakllari, 2004): "modernist and postmodernist models, or even currents and other schools have their main source in the existence of particular texts, rather than the existence of literary circles that are founded on clearly aesthetic platforms ... the avangardist novel has been written over the years by authors formed as such during communist dictatorship… and a generation of highly talented new authors, emerging as such after the 90s".

This modern novel becomes the field where are applied (Qose, 2006): "new techniques, changes in ways of using time, exchanges of different perspectives of confession, mainly fragmenting or neglecting fabula, the influence of film technique and psychoanalysis, … where inner monologue and solikok are involved, …are mixed traits of all three literary genres, ambiguity is sought. In the modern novel, also the special concentration of *Evil* happens, the absolutization of the imagination, the spreading of polysemantic mythological and archaic structures, the abandoning of the reader". This kind of novel, modernist novel, has reached its integration phase (Jakllari 2004): "has realized a great shift, from actuality stacking to the eternal universes of man ..."

On the whole, today's Albanian fictional prose has entered a stage of modernity where it is difficult to exclude any author. It's obvious the process of fermentation of a movement that has articulated almost entirely its structural syntax: maybe a possible classification of the fictional prose may be based on thematic criteria rather than on the conventional criteria, although this remains very relative. We can talk about the different levels of the identity platform: in a first group, are included works in which are considered fairly identity issues, a second group of works deals mainly with cases of historical and psycho-moral explanation of Albanian identity.

4. Why Modernism?

If we agree on the value of the specific presence of *Identity* platform in today's Albanian prose, the immediate question that arises is: what is the cause of the virtually affirmed modernism by literary critics?

One may argue with the conclusion that the roots of this process should be sought in the changes that occurred with the authors during the 90s. As Jakllari (2004) notes: "The Albanian creative subject begins to consume, sometimes intuitively and at other times consciously, elements of avant-garde and anarchist aesthetics, which put him in direct contact with Western culture".

Of course, this is a process of individual content, but apparently the differences between the new and old groups aren't dramatic: the authors react almost the same. At least, with the authors still in process, coming from the old tradition, has worked the opposition of the overly stylistic tradition that emerges as a common conventional tendency for all authors. Modernist poetics offers the same comfort to the creative subject with the relative independence given to the latter in relation to the reader.

Following the concept expressed by Jakllari (2004) can be seen the common, gradual, cyclical change of the status of the creative subject, which in the context of modernist poetics changes entirely its relationship with the discourse. In some cases, this subject using freely his creative ego sees the discourse as a purpose rather than as a mean. The creative subject's relation with the text tends to be closed: the text is offered in reading as a puzzle of the author *alter ego* which the reader has to decode, thus reaching the edge of the aesthetic maximization of the text (Dado, 2007): "... this kind of literature comes through stranger forms, through relations and structures, which in the first sight seem to have slipped the writer".

The possible links between structural modernity of texts and their identity platform are generally explained as issues of authors, their moral, mental and stylistic evolution, an insufficient critic pose, in our opinion.

A possible less relativist perspective in explaining modernism, might be from the reader's perspective, as a structural consequence of the reader's specific relationship with the texts, during an interval that includes the last two decades of socialist realism literature and the first two decades of literature in the 90s, when it finishes a traditional identity - romantic and post-romantic - cycle to start a new cycle. As an argument to describe the characteristics of this process, as a dynamics towards modernism determined by the reader, we chose to present the 'objects' constructed by interaction between the reader of the novels "The Bringer of Misfortune" (Kadare, 1974, 2008) and "Living on the Island" (Ben Blushi 2008).

5. Describing 'Objects

5.1 Kadare, "The Bringer of Misfortune"[1]

For a highly dense text of reference indicators, there is a low interaction activity, related with a low number reference indicators, mainly signifying material of everyday life. Reference indicators become meaningful only at the margins of the story, while the reference network as a whole presents a very small number of reference indicators of religious type of signifying, mainly of the material kind. Readers interact to build the story, in the absence of religious indicators - readers divide religious facts from the story corpus. For the majority of readers there are signs that the story is set in analogy with the reader's own experience, in the relative lack of stylistic and intertextual competence and even more of religious competence.

The reader is inclined towards a non-complex network understanding or even network rejection. The consequence of a poor referential network, owned by personal experience, is the discourse structure of the text, which in the vast majority of cases is built on the static discourse isotopies. The selective activity for discourse topics and discourse isotopies doesn't use the factors of ideological (religious) competence. There is a sort of coincidence between the low topic and isotopic interaction and the low intensity of the components of ideological (religious) competence. Only a few readers who manage to use religious sensitive discourse topics are able to construct systematic discourse isotopies, therefore, to construct a plot structure of the text - most of readers are reluctant to put into motion factors of ideological competence without realizing the plot structure of text. In fact, the discourse structure represents a hard dialogist for the reader.

All this gets sense when narrative isotopie is constructed. During that process there is a noticeable increase in the intensity of the reader's activity. Almost all readers construct structures: the difference lies in the mechanisms used for its construction. Only a minor stable group, builds the isotopie on the religious component of competence. The rest uses religious components in their neutral, static state. For the vast majority of readers with the construction of the narrative isotopie, the purpose of reading has also been reached. With this can be explained somewhat readers' passivity in the narrative isotopie interpretation: the same minor group makes interpretation using the ideological components of competence.

The rest, even doesn't enter the interpretation or merely repeat the narrative isotopie – seems that there rules the construction of a depthless story. The protagonist for most readers acts without any ideological impetus, but for the needs of a human routine, which is no need to be explained. The nature of the impulses on it becomes more understandable when readers build 'the possible worlds'. Not a religious stimulus affects any possible world: Haxhi Milet, the *bringer of feredjes* in the Balkans, continues to exist in a world outside off any reader system. He is guided by his essential needs of

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[1] *The data used in this case is produced by a survey on the construction of meaning by a number of students, as empirical readers. Xhindi, E. (2015, 28th August). The Initiation of Religion in Literature. In Paçarizi, Rr. (Ed), The XXXIV International Seminar for Albanian Language, Literature and Culture. Paper presented at the Proceedings of The XXXIV International Seminar for Albanian Language, Literature and Culture, 34/2 (pp. 136-147). Prishtinë: Fakulteti i Filologjisë, Prishtinë.*

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life, it responds to the immediate circumstances, the other systematic-situations do not affect him - and to do so in a story rich with referential religious indicators for readers, it is really worth to be noted .

In conclusion, for what we have analyzed the data, we conclude that the overwhelming number of respondents almost do not use the religious components of competence, because as the questionnaire proves, they do not possess those mechanisms. Structures made by them are mainly narrative isotopes in the absence of religious factors of competence, even of any of its ideological factors; the meaning of the structure is depthless, built on a pure state of action, where the impulses are produced the mere logic of the immediateness interaction of the isotopie, outside the influence of the system of religious values. Readers tend to keep the structure in its minimum meaning, even when the text encourages more.

About the text in question: the religion is a doctrinal norm that is only applicable to a low number of readers; where it appears, becomes present with low intensity, unstructured, outside organic interaction with other factors of competence, a kind of protracted cultural clichés, not well-understood by readers. At least, as a text of socialist realism it is a text about a state of 'Bare Identity' in the absence of official ideology.

5.2 Ben Blushi: "Living on the Island"[1]

From the discourse's macro-structural view this text belongs to the classical manoeuse, a kind of classical conservatism in the narrative that has often been recaptured, recently, in the European and world literary process: discourse isotopies of the syntagmatic order (Eco, 2006) at the point of division/union between them (chapters) are carried out among themselves as isotopies of the paradigmatic order for the reader.

The reader has to utilize, even to exhaust his encyclopedia even at the limit of its reconstruction. The first chapter of the book, the first conversion in Islam, i.e., is an example of multilateral disorder of competence. This complication becomes the cause for the low isotopic intensity that accompanies the construction of the structure. Reconstruction of competence requires justifying oneself.

In this respect, the syntagmatics joint nods are just intermediary units for the new isotopic sequences in function of the predecessor units, of the isotopic's structure intensity increasing and of the rebuilding of the reader's competence, a tool which is offered as an architrave for the structure. The reader, therefore, has to build a structure over the isotopic units that condition one another, seemingly linearly, but on the uncertainty and the unclear nature of the syntagmatic nodes. Are they, the real points of the structural joint of text, so less significant compared to the units they bind?

In reading this is equivalent with a kind of structural concession, the same concession the book does to the reader, who must rebuild his encyclopedia to perform the text. Almost all the encyclopaedia of the reader is now being tested, facing new references, urging new isotopic substances, new isotopies.

In this regard - the narrative structure is characterized by the need for a relatively broad dynamics of the starting point: the low isotopic intensity of the initial discourse units must necessarily increase - the reader's indecision must be avoided, otherwise the structure can't be build. Simple syntagmatic joints of discourse isotopies at the limits of the chapters while on the one hand attracts the reader to continue to carry the structure also bear the risk of even more noticeable decline in the low isotopic discourse intensity for a good part of the novel.

The text solves this simply: on the one hand, by adding the mass of the discourse units and on the other hand by adding the mass of new reference indicators (a kind of narrative arithmetic in the function of a reference math). While on the one hand, the isotopic mass is augmented, on the other hand, signals of coherence are given to the reader's ability to indirectly ensure the increasing of the isotopic intensity, so the structure conception.

The text gradually frees the reader, so much as to fully entrusts him not only its architecture but also the relevant stability. The story as a narrative isotopie is entirely a reader's issue, of the text's 'confidence' in his rebuilt competence. However, Blush's novel faces not a little difficulty: the new reference indicators are so revolutionary that predictive actions of the reader over the possible reference worlds become really difficult. Moreover, there isn't rarely an apparent asymmetry between ritual and alternative reference indicators in terms of coherence, which shakes the reference world between the reader's experience as a whole and its cultural and fictional dimension. It is during on this phase, that is, during the

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[1] *See the footnote 1.This time Eco-Fish model is used as equivalent with an integral of empiric readers*

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construction of the possible worlds, the reconstructed competence is in crisis: it has undergone such a repression of the necessity to build new isotopies/new story that it loses its ability to including the world of text in a reference world - the text gives the reader the independence he can't use - .

Actions on the actantial and ideological structure are, to a large extent, a consequence of the internal conflict characterizing the building of the story as the basic narrative text isotopie: while the ritual indicators go down to the parodist level of competence, the alternative indicators go to a deeply rebuilt level of the experience, almost fictional A strange process has been carried out: the low isotopic intensity endangered the structure's future; its (intensity) growth provides it (the future of the structure), but it undermines its sustainability. In this sense, the text is independent of the reader, who is free *to do nothing*.

Object Obtained. The object obtained still contains the reader's periodic displacements between the present and the past - this second, in view of the isotopic orientation of the structure by the reader, but this time in the boundaries of large units involved linearly to each other, either as discourse or narrative isotopies. In the modernist way it gives the illusion of a simple structure and in the same time it gives a massive renewable unknown reference indicators. Reading the text is equivalent with the rebuilding of competence.

6. Conclusions

The objects produced by the Possible Reader show a process entirely influenced by the essential changes in its encyclopedia. As a result of interaction with the reader, the Kadare's text is presented as a closed unity of a simplified and unfinished fable.

The doctrinal (religious) inadequacy of reading leads the text to the reduction in a mischievous, secular sentimental intrigue, entirely contrary to the cultural pathos that accompanies today the clashes between Christianity and Islam. Poetically, this text of socialist realism tends to deplete the peculiar fate of that literature: structural monotony.

There is a discrepancy between the large number of reference indicators offered to the reader and their low exploitation, quite the opposite of modernism practice.

Blushi's text represents an opposite, often reverse case with that of Kadare: the passive encyclopedia of the reader is encouraged to change, to be enriched, even to create its own text, independent of textural structures, achieving although the conservative perception of the text's poetics, in one of the typical states of modernity: the object's multidimensionality and uncertainty.

The meaning of the prominent identity cycle in the Albanian prose, at least for these two cases, is the need for reconstruction of identity, on new historical, cultural, moral and social data, which are accepted not unquestionably when they are offered by the literature, which leads to the reader's need for 'extrication from constrains of literature' and to the literature tendency to use this 'freedom' strengthening the modernist inclination.

In modern reading an identity cycle goes from the constructivist, ideological, post romantic tendency to deconstructivism, culturalism and psychology, toward a kind of a new romanticism of identity in a global context of being. Respectively, it is about overcoming from monocentric identity to a multicentric one.

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