

Missing Poetry: A historiography of Albanian Literature during the Communist Regime

EDLIRA MACAJ
edliralib@yahoo.com

Abstract. The paper aims at a panoramic view of the partial representation of Albanian poetry in the texts of the history of Albanian literature published during the dictatorship period (1945–1990). The fragmentary presentation of Albanian poetry and poets in informative scholarly and university texts on literature highlights the complications and the problems derived from this one-sided representation. The information gained only after the fall of the dictatorship, changed the situation regarding the literary values specifically related to poetry. What crucial representative texts on Albanian literary history were published during the dictatorship? Who were the most noticeable authors and poets, and why were they set aside, censored, imprisoned, executed, and not published? The answers suggest that only thanks to political change and awareness of literature can the reader today reassess this missing part of Albanian literature in historical texts published during the communist regime.

The methodology relies on a historical, analytical, and critical approach to the most representative authors and their texts that is intertwined with factual data. The conclusions reinforce the idea that any evaluation of the literary process dictated by extra-literary principles damages the natural literary process. The revitalisation of literature after the 1990s, although with much delay, restored the natural process of aesthetic assessment. Now we can reassess the best part of that missing poetry.

Keywords: Albanian literature; historiography; dictatorship; missing poetry; excluded poets

Introduction

Albanian literature seems to be a small one when compared with world literature. Despite this, some writers have explored the literary world through translation (Ismail Kadare, Bashkim Shehu, Elvira Dones, etc.). A historical reference serves to get familiar with Albanian literary-historical periods and their characteristics because every literature historiography is a long process of studying authors and their artistic works in the context of their historical period, genre, author styles, and more. Literary movements and the influence

of literary schools and their literary circles are not excluded. Literary historiography is indeed a process of continuous evaluation.

Referring to its history and statistics, the development of Albanian literature is noteworthy more because of its poetry than other genres. 'Old Albanian literature' was full of poetry diffused with a religious sentiment (Pjetër Budi, Pjetër Bogdani, Frang Bardhi, etc.)¹. This is why it is also known as Philo biblical literature. (Hamiti 2018) Consequently, its role was spiritual and ethical. In the period of national renaissance, poetry evoked former national glory and from the middle of the 19th century to 1912 was an encouraging subject, playing a part in the ideal of national unity and independence. The most prominent poet of the time was Naim Frashëri.² Between independence in 1912 and the end of World War II, Albanian literature overcame the difficulties related to political issues and tried to enjoy the freedom of artistic creation, albeit during one of the worst periods in world history.

After 1945 the dictatorship promoted only ideological literature related to the functions of education and propaganda. Institutional scholarly texts were systematically selected according to the regime's educative policies. Some poets who wrote in previous periods were inappropriate for the newly installed political system and were soon excluded while the study of some others was emphasised. Still others were censured and marginalised. After the fall of the regime, Albanian historiography corrected such errors of exclusions and censorship. During the dictatorship period (1945–1990) Albanian readers lost some of their best poetry.

The historiography of Albanian literature before the dictatorship

Alberto Straticó³ wrote the first informative guide to Albanian literature, titled *Manuale Della Letteratura Albanese* (Manual of the Albanian Literature) containing a critical evaluation of the literature (Straticó 1896). Later Justin Rrota⁴ tried to help high school students with information about Albanian literature (Rrota 1925), mainly by observing poets and their poems stylistically.

¹ Pjetër Budi (1566–1622), Albanian writer and a Catholic bishop, author of *The Christian Doctrine* (translation from Robert Bellarmine); Frang Bardhi (1606–1643) Albanian bishop and writer; Pjetër Bogdani (1627–1689), author of the *Cuneus Prophetarum*, 1685, written in the Gheg (northern Albanian) dialect.

² Naim Frashëri (1846–1900) was an Albanian poet, translator, and historian, known as the National poet of Albania.

³ Alberto Stratico, Italian professor of literature of Arbëresh origin.

⁴ Justin Rrota, Franciscan, historian, linguist

According to Rrota's assessment, the poet Gjergj Fishta (whom the regime did not include in scholarly editions) is "strong, emphatic, at the same time sweet in expressing feelings, and fluent in words" (Rrota, 1925, 2006: 164–177). Rrota appreciated numerous authors who would later have problems during the regime, such as Ndre Mjedja, Vincens Prennushi, Hilë Mosi, Lazër Shantoja, Mati Logoreci, Faik Konica,⁵ etc.

In the next attempt, Gaetano Petrotta⁶ edited a history of Albanian literature in which distinguished and appreciated writers such as Anton Xanoni, Mehdi Frashëri, Lasgush Poradeci, Ernest Koliqi, Mitrush Kuteli, Ndre Mjedja, A. Z. Çajupi, Gjergj Fishta, etc., appeared (Petrotta, 1931, 2008). Most of them were denied in the official literature presentations published during the dictatorship.

Another scholarly textbook was published to help high school students of the 1930s. The text was prepared by the linguist E. Çabej⁷ and organised into groups of authors by region. The first group was the old writers, the second was Albanian writers of Greece, the third Albanian writers of Italy, and the fourth 'writers of the 19th and early 20th centuries'. The latter included well-known poets such as Ndre Mjedja, Andon Zako Çajupi, Gjergj Fishta, Lumo Skëndo, Shtjefën Gjeçovi, etc. (Çabej 1936)

Koliqi and Ressuli (Koliqi, Ressuli 1941) published *Albanian Writers I, II* representing authors from the League of Prizren to 1941, most of whom were mentioned above. These representative scholarly texts scanned Albanian literature as it appeared at the end of World War II. This is also known as the period of constructive debate regarding the critical evaluation of Albanian literature. (Kërbizi, Macaj 2020: 348).

Problems for texts and authors became serious with increased pressure on literature during the dictatorship. Scholars of this period selected who and what might harm the socialist system, and decided who merited the position

⁵ Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940), Franciscan friar, poet, politician. The most influential poet of the 20th century with his poem *Lahuta e Malcis'* (The highland Lute); Ndre Mjedja (1866–1937) poet, priest, received bias study during the regime; Vincens Prennushi (1885–1949), priest and writer. He served as the Archbishop of Durrës from 1940 until his death. In 1947 the communist authorities arrested Prennushi and sentenced him to two decades of imprisonment, but he died in prison in 1949; Hilë Mosi (1885–1933); Lazër Shantoja (1891–1945) publicist, poet, and satirist. He was one of the first Catholic priests to be arrested by Albanian communist regime and executed by firing squad; Anton Xanoni (1862–1915) Jesuit poet; Mehdi Frashëri (1872–1963), politician, and writer. He was exiled and died in Rome.

⁶ Gaetano Petrotta, writer of Arbëresh origin.

⁷ Eqerem Çabej, Albanian historical linguist and one of the most important scholars of Albanology.

of canonical author and what kind of poetry should be accepted and presented in textbooks. The system didn't consider the historiography of literature published abroad, especially in Italy, edited by Arbëresh⁸ scholars in the same period. Giuseppe Schiro Junior prepared *Storia della letteratura Albanese*, 1959, (The History of the Albanian Literature), a volume that differed considerably from similar texts published in Albania in the 1950s.

The regime's representations of literature were ideological, "but the history of literature is a map of changing values, taking on new meanings after new members enter the system" (Hamiti 2010), and from this point of view, literary historiography remains an open register to be completed by worthy candidates. Even today, discussion about the publication of a comprehensive and representative literary historiography continues, although publications of this kind are present among scholars who perform their research sanctioned. The latest is the comparative study by Shehri and Asllani (Shehri, Asllani 2021) that looks at the history of Albanian literature, synchronising and framing it in clear critical theoretical premises, and enriched with many illustrations, going beyond principals of chronology, classification and periodisation.

Regime intervention

Historiographical publications, anthologies and studies of Albanian literature published during the dictatorship did not reflect the truth, rather, only some parts of it. Informative texts on the history of the development of Albanian literature censored, distorted, fragmented, removed disappeared and denied the artistic works of an elite and their best poems. The consequences were enormous with recovery from these ideological interventions coming only after the regime fell. The exclusion of poets and their texts from the history of literature influenced even the writers who escaped from the country and couldn't return. The deprivation of freedom in the artistic process created a serious stagnation in the literature field. "The literature of socialist realism united within itself all the literature published by state institutions, even though a part of it, especially that which dealt with mythological, legendary, and historical themes of past eras and periods, was avoided, if not entirely, at least in part, from the 'five principles of method'" (*On Albanian Literature of the 20th Century*, 2010).

The Third Conference of the Writers' Union established socialist realism in Albanian literature. At this conference, the poets Gjergj Fishta and Faik

⁸ During the Middle Ages the Arbëreshët (an ethnolinguistically Albanian people) settled in the Kingdom of Naples in several waves after the death of the Albanian national hero Gjergj Kastriot Skënderbeu.

Konica were labelled exponents of reactionary literature. Later the regime's critics accepted traditional poets such as Naimi Frashëri, Ndre Mjedja, An-don Z. Çajupi, and Migjeni, but even so, there were problems with evaluation. Migjeni and Mjedja were deliberately misinterpreted and used by the regime's ideology. Naim Frashëri's influence on Bektashism philosophy was mini-mised. Gjergj Fishta, Faik Konica, Ernest Koliqi, Vinçens Prennushi, etc., were expelled. If any scholar dared to challenge the ideological assessment, they too would be excluded. This fate was reserved for Sejfulla Malëshova just because he considered writers as Faik Konica, Fan Noli and Gjergj Fishta (Conference III, 1950: 85).

Almost all of the complete or partial exclusions of the poets of the 1930s came because of their political commitments before the establishment of the regime. There were also cases of disagreement with the politics of the time, for example, Kasem Trebeshina, Sejfulla Malëshova and Isuf Luzaj. The latter's poetry remains unstudied.

Because of the role they played, a list of the dictatorship's significant publi-cations is in order and will follow here.

An anthology edition of *Albanian Literature of 1950* that did not include important poets, for example, Fishta, Koliqi, and Konica. Even Zef Skiroi was excluded because of his pro-Italian profile. Today the values of these poets are known and committed to history.

The *History of Albanian Literature*, 1955, prepared for high school students, chiefly edited by Dhimitër Shuteriqi, selected poets ideologically, even distort-ing their opinions of each other. For example, Shuteriqi puts his own opinion of Ndre Mjedja into the mouth of Fishta. This edition also excluded Zef Skiroi and Faik Konica. (Shuteriqi et al. 1955: 99)

The regime tried to 'fix' Ndre Mjedja's poetry, saying as justification that he was partially a 'dark' poet because of his poetic language, and because he wrote in the Gegh dialect. Many verses were removed from his poems because they reflected his religious viewpoint: being a Catholic priest was not convenient for the regime.

The *History of Albanian Literature I, II*, 1959, gave only vague information about Fishta, such as that his poetry was influenced by folk poetry (Shuteriqi 1959: 230). The same happened again in the edition of 1960.

An archived unpublished draft of the *History of Albanian Literature* was writ-en in 1968 as an attempt to rehabilitate poets like Fishta, with statements such as "Fishta is an inspired lyrical poet... he sings warmly to the homeland and the mother tongue" (*History of Albanian Literature*, 1968: 25). For the first time, his beautiful poem *Nji lule vjeshtet* (An Autumn flower) was evaluated, and his poem *Lahuta e Malcis'* (The Highland Lute) was treated as a masterpiece

of Albanian literature (History of Albanian Literature 1968: 35). Faik Konica is also re-considered. Before this version, his avant-garde critical viewpoint was silenced and was not introduced to students. This was the only draft text that reconsidered poets excluded for ideological reasons in previous editions. Unfortunately, this draft was never published and it remained archived.

The *History of Albanian Literature*, 1983, was chiefly edited under Shuteriqi's critical eye, considering the chronological principle and orientated by ideological interpretation. Gjergj Fishta was called a chauvinist, while Ernest Koliqi was labelled a traitor. This text put Fishta's oeuvre out of circulation. His religious mission, and his political and mainly cultural contributions, were reasons why the regime didn't want to deal with him despite being famous in Albania and Italy before being censored. He became a subject of study among Arbëresh scholars as some of them had an interest in analysing his artistic work in a comparative approach with famous writers of Greek and Latin literature, as G. Gradilione did in his critical essays. Even Treccani encyclopedia described him (calling him Giorgio Fishta) as a poet who dominated literary life and was influenced by his literature in the Albanian Independence (Treccani Encyclopedia 2022). Being a Franciscan and a member of parliament prejudiced the regime's position toward him.

"Lahuta e Malcis" (The Highland Lute) identified Fishta as a national poet and the poem was appreciated by critics prior to the dictatorship, although it was missing from the 1950 edition and his opinions distorted in the 1955 edition. He was scarcely mentioned or entirely removed in later editions and was out of circulation until the end of the regime" (Hamiti 2013: 13). Fishta's fate was even sadder, as after his death, during the terror of the war on religions in 1967, his remains were exhumed. They were reburied with dignity in 1996.

Introductory texts to Albanian literature, in this case poetry, left out another important figure, Ernest Koliqi. His literary legacy included various subgenres of poetry such as sonnets, etc. Because of his political contributions during World War II, the regime considered him a traitor. He emigrated to Rome writing and publishing Albanian literature and dying there in 1975. Another similar case was that of his student Martin Camaj⁹, who continued the tradition of writing poetry in the Gegh dialect abroad and likewise was not included in academic publications.

Arshi Pipa's poetry, too, did not make it to the reader of the time as he was also imprisoned, although after his release he managed to escape from Albania

⁹ Martin Camaj, writer, poet, escaped from Albania and lived and taught at the University of Rome. Years later, in 1970, he became a professor at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. He published his poetry in Prishtina, Rome, Munich, etc.

to become a professor at Minnesota and Minneapolis universities, USA. His 'prison poem' triumphed illegally in Albania. "Kanali" (The Trench) was made up of 26 sonnets written during his incarceration on cigarette papers. The poem is about hell on earth in the camp where he was serving his sentence. "From Korça it thunders and rain streams / flowing from the raincoat on the head and the bed. / They roll, crouch under the cover: / tangled where the rack of human flesh stinks. / Evening. Someone nearby has a bleeding mouth."¹⁰ (Pipa, 1994)

The tragedies that befell the poets created the fragmentation and distortion of national cultural heritage. This practice of exclusions and punishments left a scar on the Albanian literary body. Other tragic cases show what damage ideology did to young poets such as Genc Leka and Vilson Blloshmi. The latter sealed his sentence with the poem *Saharaja* (Sahara). This poem was considered a criminal offence and "propaganda agitation for the weakening and undermining of popular power". The lines "The Sahara does not know how to dream. / It grinds stones with her mind..." alarmed the regime. To Vilson Blloshmi the writing process is an "escape and salvation. It is a transcendental flight toward unattainable beauty, and together with the ideals for such a saving beauty, the poet is perfected. It is this perfection / self-perfection that is both the escape, the rejection, and the triumph over his exclusion from others and permanent surveillance." (Tufa 2010)

Another poet, Visar Zhiti, was also imprisoned. He used the term "monumental cemeteries" for all writers and artists touched by the regime (Zhiti 2010). He survived in the extreme conditions of the most infamous prison in Albania. His poem *In Spaç Prison* manifests the terrifying silence: "Prisoners sleep. / With an old blanket of visions / covering the tired body / Here and their shoes are napping in a row / with muddy dog loyalty." (Zhiti 2010)¹¹

These historical, informative, anthological texts did not present what Paul Goma called the "bottom drawer" literature of disagreement with the government. If such poetry were to be found during a raid it would have caused not only the arrest and punishment of the author – 'for agitation and propaganda', 'for laying mines against popular power' – but also of the holder of the poetry (friend, colleague, relative, mistress). In other cases, this poetry was simply

¹⁰ Translation from the article's author of the poem verses. Original verses: "Nga Korça bumbullon. / Currila shiu / rrjedhin prej mushamás mbi krena e shtroje. / Pështillen, struken gjindja ndër mbuloje: / Nji lamsh ku qelben recka e mish njeriu. / Mbramje. Dikush përbri qet gjak për goje."

¹¹ Original of the verses: *Flenë të burgosurit. / Me një batanije të vjetër vegimesh / mbulojnë trupin e lodhur. / Ja dhe këpucët e tyre po dremitin në rresht / me një besnikëri të përbaltur qensh.*

never offered for publication and became texts of which the security staff were unaware, existing illegally.

Zef Zorba was a representative of this ‘bottom-drawer’ poetry and his poetry lost its readership at this time. On the other hand, he can be considered a lucky poet as his poems were successfully published after the fall of the communist regime. The case of the poet Frederik Rreshpja is another that shows the regime’s repressive machinery against poets. He was condemned “... as a person who poses a social danger aimed at undermining, weakening and overthrowing popular power” (Bytyçi 2010). He too was fortunate enough to live and publish after the fall of the dictatorship. His poetry was known and enjoyed as poetry of loneliness creating a mood and aestheticising it. (Macaj 2021)

Minimising what was different was another way to take control of poems. Gaspër Pali, whose poetry had a hermetic tendency, was one who took this approach, although it was this tendency, along with his tinge of loneliness and pessimism, that disqualified him from textbooks. The list of poets who were removed or marginalised, and the deliberate bias towards others, found in the historiography of Albanian literature as affected by the dictatorship (1945–1990) is a long one. More than 160 artists (writers, reporters, painters, etc.) were condemned by the regime. Some were imprisoned with long sentences (Gjergj Simoni, Petro Marko, Gjergj Komnino, Musine Kokalari, etc.). Some died in prison (E’them Haxhiademi, Vincens Prennushi); others were executed (Ndre Zadeja, Lazër Shantoja, Beqir Çela, Trifon Xhagjika, Havzi Nela, etc.) The cited cases are only part of the loss to Albanian literature, which began to recuperate only after 1990.

Conclusions

An official historiography of Albanian literature should reflect the values of literature based on the literary texts. Albanian literary historiography before the dictatorship used a constructive model of evaluation with authors assessed based on a textual critique; during the dictatorship literary historiography distorted literary values treating literature ideologically.

The dictatorship controlled and promoted literature according to the socialist realist method: what didn’t fit wasn’t allowed to have a literary life. Some poets were misinterpreted on purpose. The poetry of some others was presented in various institutional publications, but under ideological control by removing or editing verses that weren’t correctly written; some others because of their political commitment before the regime vanished from the national literary map.

Those writers who dared to challenge the system faced a tragic fate. They were considered enemies or were imprisoned for their political beliefs. Only a few managed to publish their poems after the regime.

Because of these intrusive modalities, Albanian poetry was misrepresented. Only after the fall of the dictatorship did literature return to life. After the 1990s, various models of historiographical text were re-proposed to rehabilitate the poets and give them an appropriate position in the pantheon of national values, which, for a long time, had been missing poetry.

References

- Bytyçi, K. 2010. *Frederik Rreshpja, ky bohem shqiptar*. <http://floripress.blogspot.com/2010/12/frederik-rreshpja-ky-bohem-shqiptar.html> (30.06.2022).
- Çabej, E. 1936. *Elementët e gjuhësisë e të literaturës shqipe me pjesë të zgjedhura për shkollat e mesme*. Tiranë: Shtypshkronja e Ministrisë së Arsimit.
- Dado, F. 2011. *Sfida teorike të historiografisë letrare*. Tiranë: Bota Shqiptare.
- Elsie, R. 2011. *Historia e letërsisë shqiptare*. Pejë: Dukagjini.
- Enciclopedia Treccani. 2022. *Enciclopedia Italiana fondata da Giovanni Treccani*. <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giorgio-fishta/> (30.06.2022).
- Hamiti, S. 2010. *Histori e letërsi. Historia e Letërsisë shqipe*. Materialet e Konferencës shkencore, 30–31 tetor 2009. Prishtinë: ASHAK.
- Hamiti, S. 2013. *Letërsia moderne shqipe*. Tiranë: UET press.
- Hamiti, S. 2018. *Testamenti*. Prishtinë: ASHAK.
- Historia e letërsisë shqipe*, (maket I, II, III). 1958. Tiranë: Arkiva e Institutit të Gjuhësisë dhe letërsisë.
- Historia e letërsisë shqipe*: vëllimi I. 1959. Tiranë: Universiteti Shtetëror i Tiranës.
- Historia e letërsisë shqipe*: vëllimi II. 1960. Tiranë: Universiteti Shtetëror i Tiranës.
- Historia e letërsisë shqiptare e realizmit socialist – maket*. 1985. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave.
- Historia e letërsisë shqiptare e realizmit socialist*. 1975. Tiranë: ASH&IGJL.
- Historia e letërsisë shqiptare e realizmit socialist*. 1978. Tiranë: ASH&IGJL.
- Historia e letërsisë shqiptare e viteve 1912–1939*. 1968. Tiranë: USHT, Instituti i Letërsisë. Arkiv.
- Historia e letërsisë shqiptare që nga fillimet deri te lufta nacionalçlirimtare*. (maket I, II, III). 1976. Tiranë: ASH&IGJL.
- Historia e letërsisë shqiptare: që nga fillimet deri te lufta Nacionalçlirimtare*. (maket I, II, III) 1979. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë.
- Historia e letërsisë shqiptare: që nga fillimet deri te lufta Nacionalçlirimtare*. 1983. Tiranë: Akademia e Shkencave e RPS të Shqipërisë.
- Kërbizi, M., Macaj, E. 2020. Albanian Literature in Its Critical Evaluation Process. Case Study: Periodicals. – *Interlitteraria*, 25(2), 348–358. <https://doi.org/10.12697/IL.2020.25.2.7>

- Koliqi, E., Gurakuqi, K. 1941. *Shkrimtarët shqypetarë* - pjesa II. Tiranë : Botim i Ministrisë së Arsimit.
- Koliqi, E. 2003. *Vepra 5*. Prishtinë: FAIK KONICA.
- Konferenca e tretë e lidhjes së shkrimtarëve të Shqipërisë 9–12.10.1948. Tiranë.
- Krasniqi, G. 2017. “Një pamje e poezisë moderne shqipe (hapja e formës)”. – *Palimpsest*. <https://palimpsest.al/2017/08/nje-pamje-e-poezise-moderne-shqipe-hapja-e-formes/> (10.04.2022).
- Macaj, E. 2021. *Paradigma vetmie në poezinë shqipe*. (poeti-vetmia-poezia) – *Seminari për Gjuhën Letërsinë dhe Kulturën Shqipe*, XXXIX/2. Prishtinë: Fakulteti i Filologjisë.
- Petrota, G. 1931. *Popolo, lingua e letteratura albanese*. Palermo: Tipografia Pontificia.
- Petrota, G. 2008. *Populli, gjuha dhe letërsia shqiptare*. Tiranë: Almera.
- Pipa, A. 1994. *Libri i burgut*. Tiranë: Eurorilindja.
- Resuli, N. 1941. *Shkrimtarët shqiptarë*. Tiranë: Ministria e Arsimit.
- Rrota, J. 2006. *Leteratyra shqype për klasat e mesme*. Shkodër: Botime Franceskane.
- Schiro Junior, G. 1959. *Storia della letteratura albanese*. Milano: Nuova Academia.
- Shehri, Dh. 2021. “Poezia shqipe pas rënies së realizmit socialist”. *Poezia shqipe. Fillimi i shekullit XXI*. Prishtinë: ASHAK, 17–43.
- Shehri, Dh., Asllani, P. 2021. *Për një histori të krahasuar të letërsisë shqipe*. Tiranë: Albas.
- Shuteriqi, Dh. 1955. *Histori e letërsisë shqipe* (për shkollat e mesme). Tiranë: Botim i Ministrisë s’Arsimit dhe Kulturës.
- Sinani, Sh. 2010. *Historishkrimi letrar dhe disa dukuri ndërkulturore. Historia e letërsisë shqipe*. Prishtinë: Akademia e Shkencave dhe e Arteve të Kosovës.
- Sinani, Sh. 2015. *Historia e letërsisë shqipe*. Tiranë: Botimet “Naimi”.
- Stratico, A. 1896. *Letteratura albanese*. Milano: Ulrico Hoepli.
- Tufa, A. 2017. *Mbi poezinë e Vilson Blloshmit*. <https://gazetashqiperiajone.wordpress.com/2017/03/29/mbi-poezine-e-vilson-blloshmit-nga-agron-tufa/> (10.03.2022).
- Xhiku, A. 2015. *Sprovë për një histori të letërsisë shqipe*. Tiranë: Albas.
- Zhiti, V. 2010. *Panteoni i nëndheshëm, letërsia e dënuar*. Tiranë: OMSCA-1.
- Zhiti, V. 2010. *Dorëshkrimet e fshehta të burgut*. Tiranë: Onufri.