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HUMANIST LITERATURE AS A MESSENGER OF THE COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND A TOOL FOR CREATING THE SENSE OF TOGETHERNESS

There is a permanent link between artistic works and the shared memory of cultural, religious or political communities. Our article deals with the connection that humanist literature had with the feeling of „togetherness“ in Albanian literature. The aim is to see how collective memory has been carried by the early literary works, if this has influenced the character of the Albanian humanist literature in the 16th century and if this kind of literature has motivated new community's ideas about themselves and the others. The article addresses the impact of literature in stimulating new linguistic, cultural and historical „belonging“ as a set of values, beliefs and behaviors. For this purpose, the works of the humanist authors: Marinus Barletius (alb: Marin Barleti) and Demetrius Francus (alb: Dhimiter Frangu) has been analysed. The article attempts to prove that humanist literature has been developed alongside with the sense of togetherness and often turned into the motivator for epic deeds. So far, the humanist literature became the messenger for the epic deeds' echo, influencing the character of ethnic, religious and cultural communities.

Key words: *Epic, literary works, humanist literature, epic, heroic deeds*

1. Introduction

From *the anticity*, the literature has been considered a tool for creating and sharing collective memory. She reaffirms the common roots and creates identities (in plural). It lives in permanent and inseparably relations with the aims of the religious, cultural or ethnic community members. From this point of view, literature is able to express the communities' historical memory (Çabej, 1994) and reflects „the soul of the nation“.

Epic songs reflect images that communities have developed for themselves at a certain historical moment. They express the connection between the communities and their self-confession and serve as a popular imagination of the nation. This is, perhaps, why literature has been seen as a part of the communities' intentions and has become the messenger of their concerns.

But, considering it a powerful carrier of the *sense of the togetherness*, unintentionally we attribute to the literature an *ideological function*. If the literature is still being considered as a motivator for further reinforcements of the sense of togetherness, so called „national literature“ must be considered as a very connected to the national ideology, as conveys the sense of community members. Our article aims to discuss this dimension analyzing the literary work of two humanist authors: Marinus Barletius and Demetrius Francus.

2. Epic history as a literary ideal: humanist literary works

The idea of renewal, developed mainly in medieval Italian cities during the 15th century (extended further to the 17th century) gave to the humanist authors an opportunity to renew the idea of an enlightened society (divine light scattered in the human soul on earth) and of a general cultural renewal. The humanist model was that of interweaving epic works within the human values, comparable to the authors of classical literary works, from which they were inspired. Classical myth (Miftari & Visoka, 2018: 151–156) was in the core of the medieval artistic works (Curtius, 1961: 84–201). We accept the role of the myths as historical ethno-symbolism paradigms (Smith, 1999: 10) in creating the sense of togetherness.

Humanism (as well as the whole renaissance) treated artistic works in accordance to the human aesthetic principles. Raised after the invention of the printing press, Renaissance humanism reaffirmed the transformation of the present in accordance to the classical past, trying to „recreate“ the individuals as a better moral person (Brotton, 2006: 39–40). That is the reason why the myth of the epic *hero* gained extraordinary human qualities, in addition to

those heroic. All myths (in the Middle Ages) had some accompanying rituals, just as each rite had its own accompanying myth (Segal, 2004: 61).

The Albanian medieval hero, George Castriota – Scanderbeg (alb: Gjergj Kastrioti – Skënderbeu) had already become a cult, in which the Arbër tribes (Albanians) believed. He was carried in the history mostly by a very developed Albanian oral culture (above all legendary and epic songs) on his endless stories of heroic deeds and legends of the warrior leader, or invincible knight, who was always at the head of the battles and united people using the „spirit of freedom“.

He was the strategist who showed unparalleled heroism in battle by taking the sword in his hands rather than contemplating the battle from afar. Thus, he identified with his warriors in war and in peace, did not differ from them and did not ask for anything that the first did not do him self, he showed personal courage before asking for it from his comrades. These unusual actions for a leader turned him into the beloved medieval knight, whose echoes of deeds spread through the sky of legends all over Europe. The „Arbër“ model of the medieval knight turned into the heroic European model, quickly harboring in the endless legends, which turned him into the epic knight idolized by the armies and harnessed to songs. From them, the unrepeatable hero, Scanderbeg, and his historical deeds turned into epic echo, linking the fate of the historical hero with those of the ideal medieval hero into a written literary works all around the Europe. Many books were written about his heroic deeds and unrepeatable human character. The historical epic, cultivated by the people, became the premises of the written literature in the whole 15th and 16th century. Under the power of printing presses and the opportunity to publish and reproduce copies of books, the numerous authors (among them Francus and Barletius), displaced into Venice, had an opportunity to transform their narrative memory into a written literary work, showing to the world the glory of their invincible hero and knight.

2.1. Barletius: Oral narrative as a history

The earlier and probably the most famous book about the undefeated knight, G. Castriota – Scanderbeg was the Marinus Barletius's (Alb: Marin Barleti) book: *Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi Epirotarum Principis*, with the informative title: *De Vita Moribus Ac Rebus Praecipue Aduersus Turcas, Gestis, Georgii Castrioti, Clarissimi Epirotarum Principis, qui propter celeberrima facinora, Scanderbegus, hoc est, Alexander Magnus, cognominatus fuit, libri Tredecim, per Marinum Barletium Scodrensem conscripti*. (About the excellent Prince of the Epirots, Gjergj Castrioti's, life, character

and deeds, especially against the Turks, because of his famous exploits he was surnamed Scanderbeg, that is, Alexander the Great. Thirteen books by Marin Barleti of Shkodra, published around the year 1508–1510). The book was written based on the oral history, and transmits „the echo of the epopee coming from the depth of the centuries“ (Thiesse, 2004: 25–27). The book brought in the written the myth of the hero, who served for as an *acting myth* (Burke, 1970: 202) narrated by the people (including the author Barletius, who was part of the defenders of the last Albanian castle: Scodra, fallen under the Turks in 1479).

Historia de vita et gestis Scanderbegi is the arbër's (early ethnic albanians) model of the hero, wrapped with the values of humanism, in addition to the chivalrous ones. The book tries to create a literary variant of the myth of the medieval hero. His invariant however can be found in the history. That's why the discourse of the humanist Marinus Balretius is carefully woven with aesthetic garment and epic narration.

Written in the early 16th century, *Historia de vita ed gestis...* is a reflection of the culture of remembrance carried by the Arbër priests, displaced to the Republic of Venice, where they were displaced as refugees after the fall of Shkodra and other Arbëria castles. As the memory brings always a very strong emotion, they brought in Venice a very rich oral culture, mostly epic and legendary songs on the great knight and invincible medieval hero, which became the essence for the Barletius book (but also of Demetrius Francus later).

Barletius's book, as the author himself underlined, aims to testify the history, eventhough being faced with an enormous lack of the scientific tools (chronicles, annals...). Barletius wrote his book in Acrossed a distance in time and space, which adds a tragic flavour to the description of Scanderbeg's glorious victories over the Turks (Minna, 3). However, he insisted that he was writing the history of the Albanian protagonist. But, the „history“ carried by him, therefore, is a *narrative story* of the people part of this epic grandeur of a time and of a hero. It is a story which recalls the history (existed reality) and transforms it into a narrative history (believed reality). So far, Barletius creates the „illusion“ of the history in a narrative text; like the German literature did with *The Song of the Nibelungs* (Ger: „Nibelungenlied“) and French literature did with *Roland's songs*.

Barletius was aware that he was writing the „history“ of Scanderbeg, eventhough lacking the necessary tools, cultivating a necessary intention to restore the epic grandeur of a time and a place. He found the connecting node between the memory and history, renewing „local greatness“, but also between the memory and fiction, creating the spiritual greatness, the feeling of eternal

pride of the heroic deeds of a generation of warriors, who created an era and justified the existence of the myth of the hero. The „history“ so far becomes the „eternal present“ narrated by the author but belonging to many „authors“, whose emotion is the togetherness and pride.

Barletius said that he was writing his book based on the memories (and emotion) of those people who could have lived in the „Scanderbeg era“. So he was reviving the memory by collecting pieces of stories, „remnants“ of memory, the imaginations of warriors and contemporaries, and personal testimony. He did this with the sole purpose of saving the Arbërian greatness from the fall of memory. This, as underlined, constitutes the essential relationship between memory and history. But since memory is narrated in a confession, fiction is inevitable.

Based on the title of the work, *Historia de vita ed gestis Scanderbegi* (eng: *The History of Scanderbeg's Life and Works*), Barletius was writing a history text. Even if we refer to his genre, the text emerges as a „history“. The text describes the „real deeds“. But, precisely this kind of reference is a fundamental problem. Barletius himself underlined that he was writing a work of historical discourse. But to write it, he said he lacked models:

„I had no predecessor on this road (...) I could not see the old annals“ (Barletius, 1504: 48).

Since he had no precursor, as well as being a „non-foreign spectator“, ie a witness of great deeds, he combines his experience of the chronicler with the narrative, the historical discourse with the oral literary discourse:

„I have seen many such ourselves, when the misfortune brought us to bear the unfortunate weapons to defend the homeland, from the memory of which I am now renewed as a miracle, but also about which I can not write without tears in my eyes“ (Barletius, 257).

Eventhough he lacks references, he finds them in people's memory.

„I did not write fictions, but the ones that older people carefully told me and the ones that some who participated saw with their own eyes“.

However, Barleti has experienced only some of the great events of history which he presents in his books, being within the walls of the castle of Shkodra, when it was surrounded by Ottoman troops. So, for them he testifies as a participant and as a reminder of events.

„Thus, I remember that, in the first siege of Shkodra, the enemies appeared at the base of the walls almost before we heard about them“ (Barletius, 175).

However, he had this evidence only for a few events. He created most of the „mosaic“ based on the oral stories of others, his contemporaries and the memory of the members of his ethnic, cultural and language community.

Thus, the text supersedes the narrative experience over the life experience, giving it new, broader dimensions. He constructs this experience through echo, memory and myth. And the echo of the memory of heroes and battles is one of the historical impulses for collective memory. It influences the unification. This *memory* however does not constitute *the truth*, but the narrative about the truth, or, more precisely, the story turned into a myth. So Barletius did not write a book of historical discourse (as he says), although he intends it; his book does not create references with the events which have happened in the past, but to collective *memory* carried in the form of myths; it does not refer to reality, but to the *illusion of reality*. This means that Barletius refers to the *echo of reality* through the process of superimposing the real in a discourse which frequently avoids pure historical discourse and slips into the semi-fictional narration.

The dimension of the hero's myth, that is, his ability (or that of the author of the text about him) to become a unifying personality for contemporaries and a unifying myth for future generations, implies „the echo of the myth carried into history“, able to revive the intention for the renewal of the homeland, whether historical (as a memory of great deeds and inherited territory, in Barletius), or spiritual (as a reminder of the spiritual area of compatriots, in Budi's *Dottrina Cristiana*, 1618. By selecting literary figures, Barletius did not attribute only to Scanderbeg's ability to unite Albanian princes. In his eyes, all Arbërs (epyrotians) had these qualities, being above all brave and wise. Barletius deliberately sees on them as in the protagonist, Scanderbeg, and even called them by their collective name: *Scanderbegians*:

„*Scanderbegians (...) had an ardent desire to come out and explode with an attack against the enemy*“ (Barletius, 108).

For humanists, the identification of the Arbërs with the protagonist does not only touch on the historical dimension and his influence in creating the so-called Lezha Covenant (1444), who's aim was the renewal of Arbëria. It is also related to the role that the protagonist – the brave leader – had in the spiritual upliftment of the Arbër ethnic community.

Scanderbeg was a central figure around whom the Arbër princes believed and projected the renewal of their historically known Arbëria (Albania), but he was also a personality who helped the spiritual revival of the Albanians of that time. He was the „Christian“ (similar to the other Arbërs), who recognized territory, language and traditions as signs of identity (hence he fought

for the „historical Arbëria“), while spiritually transcending these boundaries and extending his kingdom within the kingdom of God („Christian Arbëria“).

The language in which Barletius wrote his book is Latin. His text, therefore, preserves the status of the historical text, built on evidence and narratives, in a language that was „the universal language at that time“. Consequently, his text belongs to universal writing, but is related to Albanian literature by the subject that deals with it. The essence is the subject and not the language, as evidence of identity.

2.2. Demetrius Francus: The „Arbër“ model of the epic deeds

Demetrius Francus wrote his book, *Gli illustri e gloriosi gesti e vittoriose imprese fatte contro i Turchi dal Signor Don Georgio Castriotto detto Scanderbeg, Principe d 'Epiro*, driven by the idea to exalt the humanist myth of the Albanian national hero, Gjergj Kastrioti – Skenderbeu (eng: George Castriotta – Scanderbeg). Unlike Barletius, Francus point of view for writing his book is that of the chronicler, who attempts to convince us that his writings are based in historical documents – chronicles (as he says „relies in the card“). However, he does not give any accurate references to the documents that he has analyzed for writing his book.

Even though he makes a distinct between the historical facts and legends, within the text he accepts oral narratives, legends, as part of historical truth. This has been proven especially at the end of his *Commentary*, when Francus moves the objects of his text from the documents to the legends about the protagonist.

Claiming that he was writing from a historical point of view, he trusts the documents, although we do not have seen references used by him. Francus tries to convincing us in his arguments, making a clear distinction between historical objectivity and legends about the brave leader (oral narratives, very present in Barletius' work). The text, however, is not so convincing: the documents fade under the shadow of the oral narratives and legends, which in certain parts of the text prevail over the intended objectivity. This is especially true in the concluding part of his text. However, Francus is „more objective“ than Barletius in seeking historical references and being less „poetic“ in his narrative discourse. Despite the fact of being a contemporary and comrade-in-arms of Scanderbeg and had experienced for himself a part of George's history, as well as knows well the folk tales about Scanderbeg, he does not make personal testimony or recalles memory as the means on which he writes. However, as the references to the chronicles of the time are not listed within his text, we estimate that Francus, like Barletius, develops his narrative based

on collective memory (oral culture) more than on the chronicles or annals of that time. He embraced the myth at the beginning of his text; he specified two of the main premises of the myth about the Albanian hero: the rare strength and the high virtue. He said he was writing:

„(A commentary) on the wars of the Turks against Scanderbeg (...) for his rare strength and high virtue that deserve to be remembered“.

The knight of the great deeds, the invincible hero, was fighting for two kingdoms: the physical kingdom, the Kruja (Today city in Albania) as an inherited territory, and the kingdom of Jesus Christ, as a spiritual heritage:

„Scanderbeg was the eye and protector of Christians, the protector of all Christian states. He was profoundly dear to all Christians“ (Francus, 65).

The myth of Scanderbeg was the myth of the hero strongly attached to the father's land (homeland). He can not be seen – as it was the case in medieval literature – detached from the land (territory) and from the memory about it. The hero of Francus is bound to the possessions of his father. Born in them, raised living with the memory of them, he returns to finally own them when his master, John, was no longer alive. So, with the land (possessions) of the father he creates a relationship of deep interdependence: sometimes missing it, sometimes remembering it and finally possessing it, the land is transformed into a *place of memory*, from which derives the way of political behavior and military action.

Beyond the territory (physical kingdom) it raises the spiritual kingdom, the Christian world, more precisely, the Catholic Church of Rome. He fights to protect the father's land (his homeland), but also to defend Christianity. He tends to act under the sign of the cross and for the salvation of Christians from the Ottoman extension. In the institution of the Pope he saw not only the spiritual leader of the Christian (heavenly) kingdom, but also recognized his powerful role in the earthly kingdom, being: *Lord of the whole world in matters the soul and subject of Christ's help*. The myth of wisdom emphasized in the humanist era, extends throughout Francus's work. He considers Scanderbeg as a wise man, who in his character embraces heroism with an enlightened mind. The hero of Francus is the typical hero of the middle ages: wise, with strong mental features, compassionate and kind, but above all a brave in the battle field and in the assembly:

„He was wise, prudent and long-suffering, full of natural and kind behavior, a man of word and deed, brave and merciful, capable of forgiving mistakes, in case he had to forgive (...) He was the first in attacks and the last in tow“ (Francus, 19).

The myth of Francus's hero is typically humanistic in another dimension as well, in addition to wisdom and bravery: in mercy as a humanistic trait of Scanderbeg's character. Throughout his text, Francus emphasizes this dimension of George's character, aiming, by highlighting the peculiarities of his character, to complement a humanistic aesthetic principle: that of the remarkable human features of the hero. Thus, Scanderbeg is not only righteous with his soldiers and subordinates, but also merciful to the fate of his captive opponents. He set them free even when his captains showed a desire for revenge, even giving them money and making sure that they freely crossed the territories he owned. In return he was content with the oral confessions that these captives carried everywhere, saying that:

„...There was nothing in this world but a Scanderbeg and that there would never be a second like him“.

In addition, George was close to his comrades in war and in peace. In war, he shared the spoils he won with his soldiers, while in peace he spent a lot of time with them, even on the paved table he kept close to them, sitting on his table, as Francus underlines, „someone according to rank“.

„Scanderbeg honored his friends with wisdom and reverence. His top advisers always sat at the table with him, each according to the scale of value. He often made people drink from his cup, a highly valued gesture in this country“.

This feature of his character is crucial for the fate of the war, because he created trust not only in his followers, but also in the enemies, even in those who in a moment of weakness betrayed him, but whom he restored with wisdom. These stories, born among enemies more than among themselves, created the myth of the hero who deserves respect, no matter how humble he was, and influenced the creation of the myth of Scanderbeg in general. Therefore, in describing this feature of his character, Francus – as we said above – relies on oral narratives and legends that have been woven about Scanderbeg, rather than on documents, which he emphasizes whenever he describes other features of the character of the hero. This, we think, is understandable, because already the figure of the Arbër brave leader had taken root in the oral narratives about him, more than in the written works, the circulation of which was still not easy. Even, according to Francus, there are ottoman captives who, being merciful, had woven the greatest praises to the merciful Scanderbeg, thus influencing, as Francus underlines, the creation of legends about him.

3. Conclusions

The article shows that there is a permanent link between the literature and the aims of the communities which derives from their collective memory. The literary works have that power of homogenising the members of the communities and strengthening the sense of togetherness. Epic songs about the warriors' deeds for a while have been considered as a messenger of the collective consciousness about the role of the communities into the history.

Albanian humanist literature was a messenger of this collective memory, created by the Albanian authors Barletius and Francus, displaced in Italy after the fall of the last castle under the Ottoman Empires' hegemony in the late 15th century.

Barletius and Francus works on the medieval hero Scanderbeg, testifies that both oral literature and written books on Scanderbeg helped the Arbër community to strengthen the sense of togetherness. They brought back the cult of the great warrior, Scanderbeg, whose cult in his homeland, Arbëria, at that time had begun to fade with the spread of Islam and the advance of the Ottoman Empire towards Western Europe.

Barletius brought the echo of the epic deeds of the Albanian medieval hero, Scanderbeg. But, in fact he brought into the written card the echo of the legendary songs, the myth of the protagonist, conserved into the oral history. Even though, he claimed that he was writing his book based on the facts, those facts were transformed into an *acting myth*. He created the literary myth of the medieval hero, finding the „historical“ references into the people's memory.

Demetrius Francus tries to be more objective, mentioning old annals, chronicles and documents, but in fact he creates one other model of bringing into the middle of his literary work the transformed myth of Scanderbeg, as it was described in the oral history, narrated by the ordinary people. He also accepts oral narratives, legends, as part of historical truth.

Finally, the literary work of Barletius and Francus explain the ongoing relationship between letters and collective awareness. Their work was written to renew the myth of „the rise and fall of the hero“, in a narrative form according to the principles of humanism.

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HUMANISTIČKA KNJIŽEVNOST KAO GLASNIK KOLEKTIVNOG PAMĆENJA I ALAT ZA STVARANJE OSJEĆAJA ZAJEDNIŠTVA

Postoji trajna veza između umjetničkih djela i zajedničkog sjećanja kulturnih, vjerskih ili političkih zajednica. Naš se članak bavi vezom koju je humanistička književnost imala s osjećajem „zajedništva“ u albanskoj književnosti. Cilj je vidjeti kako su rana književna djela nosila kolektivno pamćenje, da li je to utjecalo na karakter albanske humanističke književnosti u XVI stoljeću i da li je ovakva književnost motivirala nove ideje zajednice o sebi i drugima. Članak se bavi utjecajem književnosti na poticanje nove jezične, kulturne i povijesne „pripadnosti“ kao skupa vrijednosti, uvjerenja i ponašanja. U tu svrhu analizirana su djela autora humanista: Marina Barletiusa (alb: Marin Barleti) i Demetrija Franca (alb: Dhimiter Frangu). Članak je pokušao dokazati da se humanistička književnost razvijala uz osjećaj zajedništva i često pretvarala u motivator za epska djela. Dosadašnja je humanistička književnost postala glasnik odjeka epskih djela, utječući na karakter etničkih, vjerskih i kulturnih zajednica.

Ključne riječi: *ep, književna djela, humanistička književnost, junačka djela*