

Preserving the “Taste”¹ of Cities in Albanian Literature of the 20th Century

Abstract: Writers are fond of intimate spaces, *topoi* (cities, places, homes), from which they can take many things. If we refer to works of Albanian literature in the 20th century, it is evident that many authors deal with particular places from different viewpoints, both in poetry and prose. These places embody typical poetics that shape writers’ emotional coverture and determine the peculiar identity of their artistic contribution. Thus, places are preserved in their literary experiences with a kind of a unique “taste”. The taste of a place (city, home, particular places) and how the writers preserve it in their literary memory are the main object of this paper. Taste manifestations will be examined by text analyses that also take into consideration the historical context, associating the line of argument with a philosophical and aesthetical interpretation.

Literary texts are often made famous due to how they evoke images of cities, made up of fragments full of colours, impressions, desires, rituals, refutations, love, fear, pride, etc.

Twentieth century Albanian literature has recorded a place-tasting literary process, which reveals each writer’s poetics. This discussion follows the line that as time goes by, even the taste process shifts from a traditional orientation toward a modern one, from a general perspective toward a personal one. Important cities like Shkodra, Tirana, Pogradec, Gjirokastra, etc., invigorate literature due to a specific connection between the writer and the place.

In conclusion, the city is not only a place where the writers cultivate their artistic identity; the writers also artistically preserve the lifelong “taste”

1 The term “taste” is placed in quotation marks to emphasise the removal of meaning from sensory perception. The quotation marks mean the metaphorical shift of taste that leaves a place (city or more personal space) in the psyche of each of the authors considered here. Put inside quotation marks, it envisions movement, play, and experience in different dimensions such as connection, impact, or comeback to different stages of their personal and literary life.

of the city. Although the particular selection of cities and authors give a limited analysis of the whole panoramic view of “taste” on 20th century Albanian literature, this paper displays the most significant viewpoints regarding the preservation of taste.

Keywords: *Topos*; “taste”; Albanian literature; 20th century; impact; preservation

Introduction

The 20th century since its inception has brought significant changes in Albanian literary memory. Albanian literature of the twentieth century has its identifying features, and some of them are related, but not limited to many changes regarding its historical aspect. The political changes that took place after the end of the Second World War with the establishment of the Albanian communist regime affected all areas of life. They also dictated the patterns to be followed in every aspect of culture, including all the arts. Regarding the latter, theoretical and aesthetical scholars of Albanian literature still debate the definitions of historical periodization. To facilitate an understanding of this paper’s object, we consider two crucial moments that we can relate to the patterns of literary creation. They are valid for identifying some authors whose primary creativity format is related to the poetics of *topoi* (cities, houses, rooms, peculiar spaces), which are metaphorically tasted in their literary works.

Period I refers to the literature of the beginning of the century and the years of national independence before World War II. This literature is characterised by how it extensively communicates with the European literary tradition. The Albanian literature of this period is in direct contact with world literature, as most of the writers of this period had studied in European countries. Their return to Albania or their creative contribution they give to creativity is very much related to this fact and as a result, their contribution also impacts literary translation. This direct establishment of contact allows literature to recover from the stagnation of previous occupations and flourish in other literary genres, techniques, and specifics. Regarding this, Topçiu claims that “the literature of this period shows precise forms of modernity through the internalization of characters in prose, mastery of the language” (Topçiu, 2010, 10). The authors of

this period are characterised by new inputs in the ways of literary constructions. This creation process recognised the stylistic developments by authors such as E. Koliqi, Migjeni, M. Kuteli, F. Konica, L. Poradeci (Krasniqi, 1988, 27). Albanian writers who worked outside Albania also contributed to it. Concerning literary achievements, it was a dynamic and qualitative period.

Period II, defined as “closed”, begins with the year 1945 and lasts until 1990. A predetermined model characterised the literature that followed, which was quite different from the previous period. During this “closed” period, socialist realism was utilised as the only creative method, which according to Dado “must be considered as a distinct phenomenon, which belongs to our historical and cultural reality” (Dado, 2006, 35). It is considered distinct, as in Albania it had an ideological direction guided entirely by a model imposed by the ruling party. The party leadership and orientation in the arts and in the literature in particular was strong, making literature dissimilar to the models of other former bloc countries. It was also isolated due to one-sided translations from and into other languages. An ideological orientation, scarce translations and literary non-communication, made Albanian literature very little or partially recognised in comparison to the works of Eastern European authors.

The literature was limited to the ideological frameworks of a dictatorial regime. The years 1945–1990 lacked the freedom for authors to express themselves in personal or modern forms or approaches. As a result of isolation, there was no direct communication with Albanian literature written abroad. It suffered an aesthetic fragmentation: first because the proposed ideological model violently limited the possibility of a natural elaboration of artistic structures. Secondly, some of the talented authors who were outstanding in the first period left the country before the installation of the dictatorship. They continued their literary work abroad in quite different conditions. Writers who stayed in Albania suffered the ideological control of the regime. Many were imprisoned, while many others were executed with or even without a formal trial.

The last century’s decade (1991–2000) is not considered in this discussion due to other historical changes. The literature of this decade denied the literature of socialist realism. This literature, emerging after the fall of the dictatorial system, had already lost much of world literary development. It rejects the creative method of the dictatorship period and, together with the freedom of thought and expression, resumes creating and experimenting with

new procedures and literary techniques as well as elaborating various linguistic styles. Many writers of the previous period did not overcome this passage, some others tried to continue, and few of those who had written in the period of the regime managed to keep writing even after its collapse. New authors are already emerging and they give a new look to Albanian literature. The literature of the 1990s appeared as a typical avant-garde movement, based on the cultural product of young poets (Marku, 2004, 129). New political events provided a new dynamic trend in literature, essentially enriching it through the same means by which it had suffered previously. During the century's last decade, literature had been trying to catch up with the lost pace. The poetics of *topos* had changed a lot compared to the previous periods, new literary themes and paths tended to appear. The poetics of the city changed a lot compared to the previous periods discussed in this paper. Thus, divided into two core periods with entirely different, if not opposite, directions of the movement, Albanian literature was characterised in each of them by features shaped as such due to other extra-literary reasons.

In the first period, literature became a source of spiritual education and the creation of national and authorial consciousness regarding the freedom of creation; in the second period, the same thing was claimed, but there was, de facto, a complete restriction of creative freedom. Hence, literature had another way of progressing. What relates to the two periods is how literature has evoked and elaborated the poetics of certain places.

Perhaps one of the most shaping elements of the poetics of different authors that started in the first period and continued (although ideologically oriented) in the second period is the special connection of writers with trendy or familiar places; places that have special significance for the very meaning and identification of their individual and artistic life both in poetry and in prose.

When the *topos* turned out to be a concrete literary subject, it "lived" throughout two critical processes: the personal authorial experience and aesthetic processing. Turned into a literary object, the *topos*, small or big, known or mysterious, a natural object, a home or a specific part of it was literarily reactivated by representing in each case a part that is closely related to a sensory and psychological (mental) process, such as a "taste". That is why places are found throughout the literature of the two periods mentioned above. According to this point of view, the "taste" obtained from the literary recreation of a *topos*

and its variations becomes an identifier of the social and cultural aspects of Albania, by combining personal experience with contextual circumstances.

Theoretical and Practical Forms of Taste

The discussion of taste, which is already a wide one, quickly recognised the metonymic shift from a literal to a philosophical, sociological, cultural, and even economic meaning.

Since Aristotle explained taste as something that instinctively pleases and displeases the human, only differing in degrees of sensibility, it gained the meaning of pleasure and its intensity (Aristotle, *Metaphys.* Lib. III. C. I.). Aristotle's meaning of taste was closely related to touching. During the Middle Ages, taste was associated with good intentions, somewhat similar with the "good", but taste became related to aesthetical judgement only in 18th century philosophy. This period of thinking related taste to an internal sensitivity that indicated beauty. The metaphorical shift directed the discussion of taste toward the subjective.

Thus, the movement from primarily tasting, toward its affiliation with the good and beautiful, as well as the subsequent movement toward an internal aesthetical evaluation (understanding, thinking, loving, memorizing) of concrete or abstract subjects, amplified the elaboration of taste.

According to Addison et al. (1965), taste is a natural mental ability cultivated as judgment through acquired experience. For Alexander Gerard, taste is an act of imagination. Hume reveals that an ideal perception is a key to mastering good taste. Kant related taste with subjectivity. Hutcheson (Dickie, 1996) evaluates taste as the inner sense that every person has for appreciation. Herder (Herder, 2006) thinks taste is culture, background, experience, and more. Shaftesbury thinks taste is related to ethics (Darwall, 1995). The discussion of taste was developed from an ideological dialect to social reality, thus becoming a sociological phenomenon.

The discussion of taste has also evolved further. It has moved from the aesthetic and philosophical aspects toward taste and tasting as a cultural activity. According to Bourdieu, taste develops within the social context, while scholars like Carolyn Korsmeyer (Gaut and Lopes, 2013) think that taste explicitly or even metaphorically is related to the personal experience with a specific object.

Considering taste as a personal experience with an object is the basis of constructing a mutual relationship between the concept and the power that an object / subject exerts in the personal perception and experience. By referring to taste as a personal relationship or as a metaphorical perception with the object (*topos*), it is possible to find the manifestations of these metaphorical poetics of taste that many writers preserve from the places they come from. For notable authors in the Albanian literature of the 20th century, this taste is indeed the spirit and soul of their literary works.

The taste associated exclusively with place defines the latter in literature as a timeless revelation: both historical and present in their consciousness and memory, very personal and not at all similar to each other's imaginative and literary articulation. The taste perceived by their places with the unique technique of sight (Hansen, 2002) shapes the importance of the *topos* in the works of these writers.

No image enters the mind without passing through sight, i.e., without visually perceiving the objects, which as an act constitutes the primary pleasures, while the memory of objects, embedded and memorised only within the mind, produces the secondary pleasures. Through the act of imagination, the individual may manipulate or alternate such images that are in the mind. Aesthetic pleasure arises only through shifting these ideas in the mind, thus going further than sensual pleasures and becoming similar to cognitive pleasures (Addison et al., 1965).

The taste that comes by preserving the images of places (whatever they are) in the literary works of the authors selected on purpose here results in an inseparable trace of their personal and literary life. This kind of taste is manifested in several types, such as an internal emotionality, based on emotional experiences; a connection between authors and specific objects; a spiritual and intellectual trace; an inseparable unit which requires a daily response, thus forming a typology of the taste of *topos* in the function of the social and cultural identity of the author himself. The *topos* will contain the flavour of the invocation of a memory, which combines the author's experience with contextual circumstances. Thus, taste will be transmitted in literary texts as a fusion of sensory, emotional, informative, analytical (psychological and social) perception. The preservation of taste created by various *topoi* constitutes their literary journey, which starts as an invocation of historical values and is concluded by very personal connections.

The *topoi* (as objects – cities, homes, rooms, private corners and streets, and as subjects – as inseparable part of the authors’ identities) in literary texts (poetry and prose) considered in this paper represent a clear transition from sensory perception toward:

1. The glory of a mythical and historical aspect in the name of canonical beauty;
2. A reflective or analytical perception as a comparison between the former glorification and the dramatic present (exaltation vs. sadness);
3. An aesthetical perception, more distant and processed concerning the author’s status;
4. A miscellanea of feelings and thoughts as a unique taste preserved, invented or reinvented in specific literary scenarios, in the works of distinguished authors.

Thus, the *topos* preserves in the literary memory of the above-mentioned period the taste of a flattering joy, endless pain, longing, regret, nostalgia, dreaming, and more. The *topos* is represented mostly by the city or by parts of it, childhood homes, rooms, secretive corners, known as “unique”, and gains the status of dynamic poetics that shift from longing toward the semiotics of the relationship created between the author and *topos*.

This paper partially indicates the relationship between authors and their beloved cities in mixed sentimentalism (emotionality) that leads their perception toward deep thinking in a continuing process of acquiring such taste. It is close to Mendelssohn’s rationalist concept of taste wherein he refers to taste as mixing perceptions and reactions made of sentiments when one understands the interconnectedness of things.

Thus, taste is indicated here as a developed internal dimension elaborating the author’s personal experience with the *topos* (emotional), the author’s psychological effect preserved from the relation with their preferred *topos*, a re-evaluation in an aesthetical aspect and in a set of interconnections that live in the author’s mind and soul. The cities they come from are part of them in mixed elements of joy, pain and longing, as the examples will show.

The City: Historicity of Taste

In the Albanian literature of the 20th century, writers naturally talk about the places they come from, and that is why the *topos* gains particular importance in their creativity. They enjoy it explicitly when the city embodies the re-creation of their emotional and mental experiences that profoundly affect the conscious and the subconscious. Important cities with an essential literary life throughout the two above-mentioned periods are Shkodra, Pogradec, Gjirokastra, and Tirana.

Shkodra is one of the most beautiful and ancient cities in Albania. It has been a source of inspiration for Albanian authors, from the priest Bogdani (bishop of Shkodra, archbishop of Skopje, Albanian theologian and philosopher) to the Arbëresh writer De Rada (1814–1903), whose most famous poem “Milosao” is set in the city of Shkodra (Hamiti, 2009, 178).

Shkodra reveals all its mythological and historical grandeur in literary texts that were created in the late 19th century but published in the 20th century for various reasons. One such author is Ndre Mjedja. His (unfinished) sonnet “Scodra” was published after his death in 1939 (Elsie, 1997, 178): the sonnet, organised in eleven units, merges historical and mythological erudition related to the city of Shkodra. The castle of the city, its surroundings, Taraboshi Mountain and the myths and legends associated with the place create the image of authenticity of this city as well as its resistance to invasions (Macaj, 2021, 25). As such, the poem preserves a taste of the city’s greatness. The author’s other poems preserve the taste of longing for his country and city, especially during the period the author spent on religious studies or missions abroad. His work preserves the taste of longing for the city by projecting a perpetual desire to return home.

The love for a city (*Topophilia*) is often manifested powerfully as a feeling of nostalgia or longing, especially for authors in exile. Details of the city appear in other poets’ works like in the poem by Filip Shiroka (1959–1935), “Go, swallow” (“Shko, dallëndyshe”). Swallows are symbolically related to the early period of spring. The poet appeals to the bird and advises how it can fly to fulfil its desire for the homeland. He suggests to the swallow an exploratory flight from a macro to a micro mental inspection by sight, while he himself recollects all the city’s beautiful places that have personal meaning to him. The swallow was ordered to describe the poet’s dear city in its current state: the old

house, the school, childhood friends, the church, mountains, hills, earth, and water. The poem essentially serves as a returning point to all of his material and emotional spaces.

Continuing this exploration but in another projection, a swallow's journey appears in a poem by Luigi Gurakuqi (1879–1825). Gurakuqi's poetry is a response to the demands that Shiroka previously made on the swallow. He admits that the bird came and carried out all the orders of exploration. Although the bird completes its mission, it nevertheless informs the reader that the beauty of Shkodra, claimed by the first poet, does not exist anymore. From a symbolic point of view, the poet Gurakuqi evokes the past spring. The present describes an alienated swallow, distant from what it saw and heard. Gurakuqi raises other questions to his friend, the poet Filip Shiroka: "But in return, did it tell / our woe did it show / did it recount it in its song? / Shkodra has been taken by worries / It does not feel anything but grief and complaints / come and see Shkodra on your own, come and cry on the Rmaj!"²

This response-poetry is an interesting case of a literary discourse between two poets who preserve a city's taste from two different perceptions. The first poet is in exile; the second one remains in the city. The first one preserves the mental taste formed previously by the emotional state; the second poet uses an analytical and critical approach. This correspondent creativity is a continuation of the same discourse with a different tasting process.

There are many writers from the first period of literature who miss their city as they are far away from it. Their emotional state is likely what the term *saudade* (a state of profound longing) implies. Some authors can often save the city's taste through traditional values. Others relate the taste with its natural spatial beauty. Many others are stuck on details focusing on relevant elements, and all these invocations become objects of their poems. The first decade of the century yielded more works of poetry than prose. Hence Shkodra reaffirms the identity of this period in literary contributions as an intentional and significant source and influence on the personal and artistic life of writers mainly born in Shkodra.

Shkodra was the inspiration for Ernest Koliqi's literary life (especially evident in the poems "Shkodra in April", "Shkodra in the Morning", "Shkodra in the Scorching Heat", "Shkodra in the Evening"). In the poem "Shkodra

2 The translation of the verses of Albanian poets is done by the authors of this paper.

in the Morning”, he preserves the taste of the warmth of life, feeling it as an unresting movement, metaphorically giving the city its energy. In the poem “Shkodra in April”, he enjoys the detailed description through an imaginary walk to suggest the interior of the poetic subject. It seems like a caressing walk, beginning with the contours of a girl and moving toward the preservation of flowers, gardens, objects of love and self-secrecy: “A corner of the garden I know where a girl always sits / embroidering under almond and flowers fall / Above the handicraft where breeze plays / waving her head from the leaves from time to time / peeking someone familiar knocking at the door”.

The “Sonnets of nostalgia” (“Tingëllimat e mallit”) relive Shkodra with the taste of its former glory and a smouldering longing: “Shkodra the harsh exile / revealed to me your beauty and made me / Much more loving of you”. From Koliqi’s point of view, Shkodra never loses its senses. He can taste every street corner, wood, any object. Connected with objects, and getting closer to a space approach, Shkodra as the entity, or its smaller parts, such as an old house, a mystic room, wells, and any other elements of life and time lived in Shkodra, are reconsidered through romantic colours, nostalgia, and imaginary returns revived in dreams. For Koliqi, Shkodra preserved its nostalgic taste until the end of the poet’s life. Koliqi spent his last years in Rome, as he was unable to return to Albania due to political reasons. The dictatorial regime in Albania excluded the writer from the literary system, as it was done to many others. Koliqi’s political views and open art were unacceptable to the system. Ending his life in exile greatly adds to his longing for the country, and especially to his beloved Shkodra. He immortalises Shkodra in his images preserved in memory and leaves his mission of impossible return to his daughter. He claimed a hypothetical returning in the poem “To my daughter”: “Go, go, my darling daughter, there in my Shkodra / When in the dark I will be done / With a body and dreams” (Koliqi, 2003, 75).

For another poet, Gjergj Fishta (1871–1940), Shkodra remained an unconditional love, as he affirms by saying: “Why it is true: that Shkodra belongs to me and I to it” (Fishta, 1941, 25).

Shkodra has been one of the most integrated cities, also due to the emancipatory role played by the Saverian college in the formation of Albanian intellectuals and writers (Macaj, 2021, 115). For a large part of these authors, some educated mainly in the Jesuit school (secular and religious) of Shkodra, the

city is preserved and perpetuated with high emotional sensitivity in their poetic art for many reasons. First, as they were born and raised in the city, it became the cradle of their education. They experienced there the first stage of emotional connection and the history of the city. Secondly, due to subsequent studies in different European countries, they developed feelings of longing that do not fade but intensify over time. Although they had partial comebacks in time, this strong emotional connection culminates in pain, as for various reasons (such as the Italian and German invasions and later on completely expelled from the communist regime) they did not return to their native country and died outside Albania. Gurakuqi was killed in Bari, Italy. Koliqi died in exile in 1975.

Dramatic Taste of the City

Shkodra quickly acquires new tendencies of taste in analytical sensation: the way of enjoying the city as an “external beauty, natural and magic, as a decoration and expressing romantic longing” especially is upturned in the works of Migjeni (1911–1938), one of the most distinguished Albanian poets, who writes of the analytical and psychological dimension of the city’s taste. Poets like him do not longer taste the city as exiles, but instead as local residents, the city through their internal experience. There is a new dimension of taste, borne of a vivid, fine, and good impression of the city in Migjeni’s poems; it is a factual, dramatic, and psycho-social analysis that indicates the movement of the towards the social drama. This is quite evident in the *Songs of Misery (Kangët e mjerimit)*, and especially in the *Novellets of the Northern City (Novelat e qytetit të veriut)*. The taste that the author gets from Shkodra is manifested in a mixture of feelings and thoughts: paradox, pain, luxury, misery, drama in itself (Migjeni, 2002).

Ernest Koliqi treats the city entirely differently in his prose from the 1930s. The city of Shkodra is located near a mountain and the seacoast at the same time. Koliqi conveys another authorial taste between dynamics and stagnation, a tradition symbolically related to the mountain, and the desire to move forward to the other side associated with the sea. His poems, works of prose and short stories preserve the taste of the city between its former glory and the efforts to preserve it as a lost taste, and, on the other hand, with the uncertainties of a new time.

Even the young poet Gasper Pali (1916–1942) is associated with the city in an entirely personal aspect, even when he evokes its glory. In his poems, Pali seeks the former taste of the city, that of glory. He then runs toward the realm of love for the city, as seen in his collection of poems *Conversation with my City, Scodrión Nights*. Pali's poetry saves the connection: the poet and the city, the city as a poetic subject, and the city as a support in solitude (Tonuzi, 2019, 5). Until the end of World War II, Shkodra, Durrës and Tirana appear frequently in the published works of Albanian literature.

In the prose of the 1930s, cities like Durrës and Tirana come with the taste of clutter, drama, and paradox as they appear in the work by Faik Konica *Doctor Needle Reveals the Roots of Mamurras Drama (Doktor Gjilpëra zbulon rrënjët e dramës së Mamurrasit)*. Beyond historical glory, authors now perceive a different taste of cities. This does not make the theme of the city and the author-city connection any less elaborate. Through the bitter taste that social drama leaves, the city takes on a different look in literary memory. There is a confrontation between the former city, its glory and stability over the centuries, and the reality of the 1930s. The return to the attention of the city is thus a comparison between its glorious past and bitter present. The past and the present are both important for establishing strong bonds between the author and the city as between exaltation and sadness. So, we consider this confrontation with the city as having a rather analytical taste, because of the essence of the situation, and the desire to evoke the memory of the former city even though it is now impossible.

This dynamic time for the historical and social context in Albania slowly opens the way to the second period discussed in this paper, the period after the Second World War. This literary period, characterised by the establishment of a dictatorial regime, differently reflects the recapture of the *topos* and the aesthetic taste derived from it. In this subsequent period, we will have a more sympathetic view for the country in general and its achievements in every direction. This taste of exaltation for the *topos* comes from ideological dictation.

On the other hand, we have some completely original and personal designs of the *topos* and *subtopos*. We have a mixed reflection, especially on some authors who proceed with a layered discourse and codification of meaning. The taste preserved from the *topos* is already being processed concerning their status, literary complications, political or social positions, etc.

Aesthetical Taste of the City (Love, Spirit, Mysticism)

The whole city or particular parts of it compound an integral part of the self, but also of writers' creativity place, building an intimate relationship with the author. For all the poets, generally those who wrote in the interwar period, the homeland was synonymous with love. As such, this new taste gained from the recovery; re-codifies the concept of enjoying the city or intimate spaces in a more personal dimension. So, we have a preservation of the memory of cities in the personal maps of the authors, from a taste of glory to a taste that places pain on an almost mystical and very significant spiritual connection, especially seen in the works of Lasgush Poradeci and Ismail Kadare.

Lasgush Poradeci (1899–1987), known in the Albanian literary circles under his pen name derived from his birth city Pogradec, was a poet shunned during second period, as his creative imagination did not correspond to the model proposed by the regime. His style is characterised by stylistic and technical achievements and engagement with nature, eroticism, and philosophy (Logoreci, 1977, 16). The taste of love, secrecy, metaphysics, philosophical perception, a new literary discourse, mainly when referring to Lake Ohrid, is affirmed in his poems. Unlike the romanticism of the abovementioned poets related to Shkodra, Poradeci creates a more spiritual, deep, and mystical connection with the city of Pogradec and Lake Ohrid. This city enters his art as a poetic subject that continuously enchants the poet (Elsie, 2010, 362–363).

The city and specifically the lake became the principal inspiration for Poradeci's poems. The first two published volumes of poems *Dance of Stars* (*Vallja e yjeve*, 1933) and *Star of the Heart* (*Ylli i zemrës*, 1937) affirmed a most promising poet. In the second period defined here, when literary work was ideologically oriented, the poetry of Poradeci had a completely different spirit, entirely out of political engagement. He wrote unconventional poetry free of fixed schemas provided by censorship, while "The Lake City" greatly helped him manifest his poetics. The city as its identity appears in the poem "The Lake Naps" ("Dremit liqeri") or the poem "Poradeci", where based on Lake Ohrid, the taste of the city is perceived as food for metaphysical dialectics, sensibility, secrecy, and philosophical research (Poradeci, 1990). Because of the abovementioned characteristics it is very difficult to translate the works of Poradeci; their "quasi untranslatability" is due to the author's subtle poetic language, a

high stylistic system of tropes, affinity with neologisms and archaisms, and the joyful poetic play of sounds, not mentioning his philosophical system.

However, the second period implied here is characterised by attention to cities more in prose than in poetry. Of course, the cases of political engagement poetry “dedicated to cities” are numerous, but in this paper, we focus on the peculiar taste of the *topos* in Ismail Kadare’s poetics, mainly in his prose. His oeuvre is deeply connected to its native social, psychological, emotional, and literary background (Kuçuku, 2005, 12). Thus, the weight of the place follows the writer wherever he may be. Cities, settlements, neighbourhoods, and homes become important poetic subjects in Kadare’s work. The creativity of the *topos* takes life with him, giving life to another system, the semiotic one.

In Kadare’s work, the tastes obtained and preserved by the relationship he creates with cities are complex. Starting with his hometown, he not only shows a strong emotional connection with that city, but immerses it in the great world of his creation by defining his identity, while other cities like Tirana, and later Moscow or Paris will intertwine tastes with each other because of his experiences with them. Through cities or even smaller places, Kadare conveys a different kind of taste preserved by his beloved cities. With them, he builds many different bridges of communication with the reader.

The City: Semiotics of Taste

Kadare’s novels are an important literary source to know two cities: Gjirokastra, the city of his birth and childhood, and Tirana, the city of his intellectual success. The appearance of cities throughout his literary works testifies to their impact on personal and literary memory and the “taste” that the author acquires by preserving their traces. Kadare evokes the cities even in a whole another experience his poem, “Tirana’s Fall”. Another novel is centred around the magical aura of a city.

Tirana, a city that has gained more importance in the historical-political and socio-cultural context since its proclamation as temporary capital in 1920 by the Congress of Lushnja, and then redeclared capital in 1925 by the Constitutional Assembly, lives in the work of Kadare with easily identifiable spatial features that run parallel to the dominant line of the work where it is functionalised. Tirana

does not come only as a formal and superficial aspect of his cultural identity, but it becomes the anatomy in almost all of his main literary works. Soon, his novels will also serve as a guide on the historical sites of the city. Kadare “tastes” this city by combining the static plan (space) with the dynamic one (time). The city creates an aesthetic-semiotic game between the characteristics of the *topos* and characters moving around the literary scenario. The resulting final taste is a complicated one. In the novel *Winter of Great Solitude*, Tirana has the taste of “desire” as a city located in the spotlight.

Gjirokastra, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, on the other hand, became the city of Kadare’s personal and intimate dimension, starting from the most popular of his novels *Chronicle in Stone* (*Kronikë në gur*). There appears a city that retains its historical, atypical taste unlike any other. It is activated to reflect the author’s socio-anthropological point of view: “It was a sloping city, perhaps the sloppiest in the world, that had broken all the laws of architecture and urban planning [...], a city that resembled nothing” (Kadare, 2005, 56). The dominant taste of his hometown remains that of coming back again and again: “[...] yet, without even realizing why, how to obey a vocation of the race, I was suddenly reminded of what I was convinced I had forgotten forever: hometown” (Kadare, 2005, 56).

The writer’s childhood house keeps preserving an unchanging taste as time passes by. It keeps resurfacing in most of his notable works. One such place that had remained so mysterious for his childish perception was the cistern, the place where water is collected for the house. It became a source for his childish surprise and imaginary scenarios:

During the construction of the city, the most cunning wood was glued to the third floor, leaving the stone foundations, gutters, and cisterns. (Kadare, 2015, 114)

There, in the dark and dull cistern, they would then sadly recall the celestial spaces they would never see again, the great cities beneath them, and the lightning-filled horizons. [...] The cistern was large. It lay almost under the whole surface of our house, and if it exploded, it could first overturn the dome and then shake the whole basement of the house because our city was a sloping one, and in this city, anything could happen. (Kadare, 2015, 16)

Gjirokastra seems “a city that resembled nothing and a city where anything could happen”, from which Kadare does not break away and to which he will return

to experience joy again from time to time. Parts of the city, its neighbourhoods, back streets and corners, are manifested in Kadare's literary work in another colour of his memory, essentially preserving the city's immutability: "Our neighbourhood was grey, with dense buildings, almost adjacent to each other. Here everything was defined, entrenched once and for all, hundreds of years ago. Roads, curves, corners, thresholds of houses, telephone poles, and everything else were as if cast in stone, once and for all" (Kadare, 2015, 21).

In another passage Kadare writes: "As far as was known, the house of Kadare was among the four or five rare houses of the city, that had a prison, which for some was just nonsense, and for others, it was related to some outdated ideas, about law affairs, in other words, the government had its laws, but the house had its own, in short, each in his own business" (Kadare, 2015, 21).

Small places, which are very personal in experiencing emotions, take the most significant importance. Such is: "the house, apart from being huge, was old and stately... or ... The house of the Dobats was probably such because it was secluded, without neighbourhoods or streets, which, in a way, would force it to resemble others" (Kadare, 2015, 21). "I had noticed that all the family members had a special relationship with the house" (Kadare, 2015, 138).

Both Gjirokastra and Tirana appear from many points of view in Kadare's work, returning from an analytical perception that starts with the external and the objective vision towards the complication of mutual psychological and spiritual relations and connections.

Gjirokastra, the city of stone, unique for its kind, and Tirana as a complex and multifaceted reference point, are reactivated in his works beyond paradoxes and secrecy. Their taste in the author's poetics is laid out in a colourful paradigm. Indeed, it includes the levels of time, depth in socio-anthropological aspects, and the complexities of the individual himself. As such, the taste of the *topos* for Kadare is a "gourmet" of all manifestations of taste that included other authors writings about their cities; for Kadare, however, it was important to describe the city as if it had a life and soul of its own. The taste received from these two cities was perceived early and for a long time as a personal memoiristic experience towards the personal and social analyses, and often closing as a strong psychological effect that may fade but not disappear. In Kadare's literary legacy, taste manifests itself as a mixture of emotional moods, opinions, analyses, facts that face complexes, paradoxes, wonderings, a kind of auto poetics, etc. The taste

of the *topos* that Kadare receives may be the one he fails to remember, but also the one he cannot avoid either and cannot explain why. The *topos*, in Kadarean poetics, marks a mix of perceptions, assessments and judgments made of flesh and blood as complex as the human itself. As a mixture of meanings, it marks a semiotic meaning open to many interpretations.

To all the authors included here, the taste perceived by evoking of the *topos*, in fact, inadvertently performs one of the essential sociological functions of the human: the preservation of their traces, preservation in the code of creative art through the word that fades into the imagination. Each of the models manifested among them differs from the other in the way they preserve such taste.

Conclusions

Albanian authors of the 20th century had strong connections with their *topoi*, creating a dynamic tasting process related to their favourite places. The *topoi* are treated in their works as literary objects (mainly in poetry) and as subjects (while giving them a kind of life, mood, etc.). The writers “tasted” places and turned them into a personal literary “modus”. Whatever the shape and size of the *topos* (city, neighbourhood, house, intimate corners, etc.), the creative consciousness of the authors tasted them in different variations, mainly as a conscious and subconscious reversal to identify the social and cultural aspects of the time.

Taste, which refers to the semantic of the metaphorical, departing from its literal (sensorial) concept, semiotically interprets the author’s connection with the subject (the *topos*). As such, it results in a particular typology of its manifestation in the literature of this century.

The city, the house, the small places are reactivated in the poetics of Albanian 20th century authors through a perspective that begins with the mythological-historical glory and moves towards the spiritual connections created by real experiences associated with the cities. Thus, the authors preserve from their places a taste that positions the places, whatever they are, as personal wealth. There is a transition from a traditional and broadly identifying taste to a more personal and more complex taste. The taste of the *topos* is beyond sensation and comes as a reflection on themes, images, style and its influence on the psyche.

The *topos* is complete and well-tested in identifying authors and society and the relationships created between the two.

In the first period of the 20th century, mainly in poetry, the *topos* (a city) generally represents in literary works **the taste for:**

- *Identifying authenticity (myth and history)*. Such is Shkodra as an important centre of culture, maintaining the status of the country's cultural capital city until the end of the Second World War. The taste of glory and beauty is perceived especially by poets born and educated in the city.
- *Revocation of national identity and traditional values*. It is typical of the poetry of the beginning of the century.
- *Personal affiliation* is related to longing, nostalgia, the personal author-place relationship, partly due to the inability of poets to return to their country for various reasons.
- The same *topoi* changed their effect on writers of the years 1920–1940. The taste of cities became more complex. The cities were perceived in terms of their psychological and dramatic effect. This is manifested clearly in the prose of the 1930s.

If Shkodra's taste is characterised by physical absence and presence within one's soul (mainly in verse) and emphasised dramatically in novelettes or short stories of the 1930s, the city of Pogradec was fully spiritually tasted by Poradeci. The city and its adjacent lake became literary subjects too. In Poradeci's poetry, the city's taste goes along with inspiration, topophilia, creativity, love, mysticism, metaphysics, harmony, etc. Pogradec and Lake Ohrid are spiritually and literarily revived.

During the communist regime (1945 - 1990), another taste preserved by the city appeared in literature. It came mainly with the elaboration of prose, especially in Kadare's works. It changed the tasting process of the *topos*. Tirana and Gjirokastra, in the second half of the century, are manifested in Kadare as having a "gourmet" taste. The author can be seen as an expert connoisseur who uses his high aesthetic knowledge to give the *topos* a literary perpetuation and preserve from it a taste composed of all the above tastes: historical, atypical, restorative, dominant, etc.

Thus, the literature of the 20th century in Albania manages to taste the *topos* not only in the personal aspect but also metaphorically, in the socio-

cultural aspect. Writers of this century preserved an artistic lifelong “taste” of their favourite personal or famous places. According to this taste, places have gained an irreplaceable position in every author’s mindset.

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