

THE LANGUAGE OF ISMAIL KADARE AND JAMES JOYCE: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW



Literature

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Abstract

Ismail Kadare and James Joyce have some very interesting similarities at the level of their literary language. This paper aims to outline an overview of these similarities. Both writers have contributed a lot in the elaboration of each respective language by mastering it in a superior level of expression, one of the most apparent aspects of which is their expansion of lexis. Likewise, they both gave emphasis to the visual aspect of language, as is witnessed by their fondness for anagrams, backward writing, specific spellings, etc. Even more important is their attentiveness regarding the sound aspect of language, pushed to the limits by Joyce, but persistently pursued also by Kadare. It is no mere coincidence that music figures so largely in their works. Another important commonality is the frequent use of foreign words by both writers. Without going to the limits of *Finnegans Wake* where Joyce used even words borrowed from Albanian, Kadare exploits with great effect a wide range of foreign words, from Russian to French, from Chinese to Swedish. Lastly, both writers had an incomparably sharp sensitivity to discursive registers, representing convincingly characters from the widest range of social strata, some of them traditionally excluded from literary language. Drawing on Kadare's remarks on Joyce's "multilingual delirium", his attempt to "create the language of water and wind", etc, it is concluded that these similarities in language are not fortuitous, and that Joyce was an important reference point in Kadare's explorations in literary language.

Ismail Kadare and James Joyce have some very interesting similarities in the level of their literary language. Indeed, Joyce was an incomparable virtuoso of English language, by mastering the language in that level that could do everything with it. Critics have even suggested that this linguistic virtuosity of Joyce constituted a project to re-colonise the English language, to take that to the colonial rulers. (Howes 2004: 257). Even Kadare, on the other hand, is continually named as the most distinguished stylist of Albanian modern literature, by highlighting not only his mastery but also the influential power of his language in the Albanian letters in general.¹ Not occasionally, his work is often expounded as a major evidence of the vitality and standard of the Albanian language.² There have even been compiled dictionaries of Kadare's works. But, implied similarities here in between two authors are not simply related to this aspect of prosperity and virtuosity, as language is the basic device with which the writer works, and becoming skilful in its mastery is the utmost aim, especially for writers of this rank. It is related to more specific similarities.

Above all, however, it is important to draw a distinction between two authors regarding this approach. With all the indisputable importance, it seems that the "dandyism" of Kadare in the sphere of language doesn't meet that point as to "make the clothes more important than the body beneath", as it happens in Joyce (Burgess 1973: 16). In the semiological terms posited by U. Eco, in *Ulysses*, and even more in *Finnegans Wake*, there is "the affirmation of a discourse that does not make assertions about the world using signifieds which the signifiers organize in a certain

¹ For more on this point, see Prendi 2012, Kryeziu 2015, etc.

² Sinani 2009; Kryeziu 2015: 187.

relation, but becomes itself reflexive representation of the world organizing for this purpose the internal relationships among the signifiers – whilst the signifieds interfere only in secondary function, as support of signifiers, as if the indicated *thing* were a conventional *sign*, enabling to signify the indicating *term*” (Eco 1966: 168). In philosophical terms of language, it means a displacement of emphasis from the semantic to the pragmatic plan of language.³

A common interest of both authors in the linguistic plan, though with differences in the quantitative plan has to do with their attention towards the word as visual symbol despite its sound aspect, towards spelling details of the sign, its effect of phonetic materialism. An aspect when the attention towards visual is displayed particularly clearly has to do with cases when the word or phrase is constricted to have an iconic despite its conventional role, where “signifier” should not only refuse but imitate as well. A typical example related to this is chapter seven “Eolus” of Ulysses, which takes place in the newspaper office. While observing typography, Leopold tries to read a part of the text that he is preparing, exactly as he puts that in order: backwards. In Kadare’s *Monster*, on the other side, the worried character Lena has a glimpse of the girl who is staring at her from the table nearby, where she notices on her mail box an address, which in the text is written in an inverted form, exactly to give visually the respective position of both characters:

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In Joyce’s works a similar approach towards visual aspect is developed in extreme in *Finnegans Wake*, where some of the characters appear with certain symbols (Δ, Λ, E, etc.) the transformation of which conveys new meanings in accordance to the initial meaning of the symbol.⁵ Of the same “visual” aspect is the interest with anagrams, specific spellings, etc. In this point comes into mind especially the interest of Kadare with alphabets (as occurs in *The City With No Signs*, where one of the main factors of the authors abashment derives from the effect of the Arabic and Greek letters of manuscripts that he has delved), or the games with anagrams (as is the case of “Thremoh”, an anagram of “Homerth”, in *The Monster*). Naturally, the principal power and the initial interest of the authors’ language goes far further this somewhat peripheral aspect.

In his approach to language, Joyce is based on the concept of language as a continuum where in the middle, groups of letters signify ordinary words, on the one side, shade into non-linguistic symbols- (arithmetical, algebraic, cabbalistic, etc) essentially visual, and on the other, into attempts of representing inarticulate noise (Burgess 1973: 17). If in the “visual” aspect Joyce reached an end point, the same thing can be said for the opposite side, that of representing inarticulate noise. The most striking case is related to the famous portmanteau words consisting of one hundred letters in *Finnegans Wake* which represent the sound of thunder. This element is so

³ For more on this point, see Martinich 2005.

⁴ I. Kadare, *The Monster*, p. 288.

⁵ For this, see especially Burgess 1973: 18-22. In this line of visual effect is the use of kind of writing as characteristic element of the character (ibid).

striking that Umberto Eco has introduced the possibility to read this work even as “pure music”, reading it aloud and undisturbed by the dense network of intertextual references (Eco 2010: 218).

Kadare, on the other side, not only mentions this work several times, in the literary prose as in his essays, but also appears especially sensitive to this ‘sound’ aspect, as is proved by the comment of Joyce in attempt to create “the language of water and wind.” In *Invitation To The Writer’s Studio*, meditating over the difference between reading the text internally and hearing it read by someone else, Kadare states: in Joyce’s “*Finnegans Wake*”, almost no reader is capable of finding a rare part, as is the description of washerwomen on the bank the river, at dawn, whose gossip merges with the murmurs of water, while in the morning they are nothing but rocks on the river banks, after which rustle the waters.”⁶

By noticing the importance of sensory perception, particularly hearing, in Kadare’s prose, Matteo Mandalà highlights the special importance that noises, howling, crowing, sirens, motors, whispers, etc, change the situation of characters who experience an ontological metamorphosis, which he states that Kadare has undoubtedly taken from the onomatopoeic start of *Finnegans Wake* (Mandalà 2018: 66).

Joyce recognised, more than any literary artist of our century, the close kinship between music and poetry in twentieth century (Burgess 1973: 90). His prose musicality wasn’t simply a matter of decorative whim, but a way of empowering literature through the exploitation of the possibilities of similar arts. Despite the musical background that he had, this tendency was facilitated by the influence of the *fin de siècle* aesthetics, according to which all arts aim towards the state of music (as straightforward and pure expressiveness).

Kadare has not received any specific musical education, and in this sense it is natural not to find use of musical technical procedures like imitations, as happens in Joyce’s work. However, the relation between prose and music is really multifarious. In a recent edition, musicologist Vasil S. Tole has dedicated a thorough study to this multifaceted relationship. For the present purposes without elaborating the specific ways music orchestrates the development of events in decisive scenes almost in the same way as in cinematography (the climax scene in the *General*, also the climax scene with the bards in the *Palace*), in sociology of taste and musical reception that is outlined in the works, or in various aspects of this kind, related to the context it is important to notice the importance of Kadare towards sound, musical aspect of the word. So, for example, in the short story *Fatkeqësi nga Suzana (Disgrace from Suzana)*, in her craving for Suzana, Leza thinks that even her name has a chopping sound as that of a knife blade, “suz”. In *Twilight*, in the dramatic evening of breaking up the relationship with Lida Snjegina the student narrator reflects how sublime is the word “aksham”, in the sense that it gives very strongly even with its sound aspect the idea of darkness, grief: “ Aksham, I thought, what a great word. Tonight was really aksham. It was not evening, neither *soir* nor *vjeçer*, but aksham. Aksham on the frozen Russian steppes, on the phones of duty teams, over cities, kolkhozes, memories of civil war, snow, cannons

⁶ I. Kadare, *Invitation To The Writer’s Studio*, f. 176.

and the soviets of sixteen republics. Aksham over the most spacious city of the world.” (Kadare 2008: 119).

In post 1990 works, scholar Matteo Mandalà observes a greater empowerment of the attention towards this aspect, especially in the rhythm and inner musicality of the phrase, empowerment which according to him, on one hand marks a new phase of experimentation in the most hermetic modernist writing, on the other hand expresses the writers’ wish to fulfil the new expressive requirements, possibly the ones that he couldn’t accomplish during the regime years (Mandalà 2018: 59).

As can be understood by the aforementioned fragment of *Twilight of the Eastern Gods*, Kadare has not remained unaffected by “Joyce’s multicoloured delirium” as he describes it in the poetry *Në Studion Dimërore (In the Invernal Studio)* of 1985. Naturally, even here we have to do with degree differences. This is not only related to the fact that Joyce’s family moved time and again in areas where everyday language was sometimes French, sometimes German and sometimes Italian. In the period of writing *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce deliberately learned new languages to enrich his dream-texture of his book – perhaps wrongly – as this would emphasise the universality of his subject (Burgess 1973: 178). Even at this point, the extreme ambition pushed Joyce far beyond main European Latin – Teutonic languages, including even small and very peripheral languages, one of which being Albanian! For a long time, lexicographers have been diligently tracing this work thoroughly to find and systematize its many linguistic layers. There are some fragments where can be found words in Albanian language.

Kadare didn’t have such ambitions to include “universal” languages in his works. But there is no doubt that the degree of the presence of words or expressions from foreign languages in his work is in stark contrast with the extreme tightness of socialist realism. Therefore, the aforementioned “multicoloured delirium” seems to have played a referent function, always adapting to creative individuality and specific aims, work after work. So in *Twilight*, for example, because of the multinationality of the students of Gorki Institute where the events happen, the wider presence of foreign languages can be easily justified in terms of realism, even though in the general artistic plans the effects go beyond. The main character in *The Winter*, Besnik Struga, is an interpreter, and exactly the mistranslation (at first during Hrushov’s visit in Albania, without consequences, and later in the famous Moscow’s meeting, with severe political and personal consequences) is one of the most important motifs of the work. Even his fiancée, Zana, betrays him with Mark, her “déclassé” neighbour during a French class. The French phrase *Il fait froid!*, preceding this betrayal has a symbolic meaning as well. It will be used as leitmotif by Mark and his fiancé in *The Concert*.

Loaning words from foreign languages in Kadare’s works is relatively constant. Since an early work as *The Monster*, for example, we can observe such reflexions as with the expression “skoll” that accompanies the toast in Swedish language, which has its origin from the Vikings and skulls that they used as glasses for drinks, with the same etymological root with the English word “skull”. In other cases, however, its use is not a simple exoticism or alienating effect.

It has a subtle allegoric meaning. Reflexions happen during Lena and Mark's engagement dinner, a matched engagement which Lena doesn't want. The implication is that the dinner should be a celebration of love, but in fact it has a ghastly dimension as the engagement through matching has violated and desecrated its human essence.

The work that affects the other geographic edge in the linguistic plan is *The Concert*. In Mao's reflexions, there are a number of terms from Chinese or Tibetan language which transmit in the original language some of the Maoist characteristic principles (*dge-beu*, *shi-gnas*, etc). In function of characterisation are repeatedly used expressions from western languages from the "déclassé"⁷ that follow attentively the relationship with Maoist China. One of the most striking findings in this regard is the communication in English of Skënder Bermema with the hotel guard, the night of death of Mao Ce Dun. In contrast to the sharp denunciation of "killing human communication" because of speaking with slogans in the conditions of the repression of the Cultural Revolution years, the writer is surprised by the guard's desire to communicate. Even though the need originated from the pain of the Chinese for Mao's near death, Bermema, who throughout this novel ruthlessly scourges his dictator and regime, feels that is touched by the sincere human tears of the guard: "*The chairman is dying!*"

Joyce may stretch language inordinately both in lexis and prosodic organisation (Burgess 1973: 26). This is true even for Kadare, and his contribution is to be underlined especially if is considered the fact that this expansion was done in an order that, as the findings of Ardian Vehbiu prove, had a tendency to control the public discourse through the constriction of communicative⁸ register. But, however contradictory it may seem in first place, besides the enriching and expansion of the language, both authors had a tendency towards conciseness and precision of the expression. In *Dubliners*, for example, the style retains more steadily a flatness that responds exactly to the gloomy reality that he describes. Even in *Dasma (The Wedding)*, which Kadare has continuously declared as the poorest work, can be noticed a very rough parallelism, where linear narrative line is interpreted as interwoven with life's mediocrity and monotony (Kryeziu 2015: 34). We can remember here another parallelism in between *Dubliners* and *The General of the Dead Army* of Kadare, where in both cases, to the characters or more exactly to the narrative universe is denied the spring.

Even though he used examples of almost every dialect and spoken English language, is what the author attributed as "sacred eloquence of Dublin" (Nolan 2002: 57) what makes up the essence of Joyce's language. Even Kadare, as a first hand stylist in Albanian letters, has enriched his artistic language with expressive means of spoken language (Prendi 2012: 103). The dialect, in the strict sense, is not a typical means of characterisation in his work. Even when it does, it is related to episodic characters, even there it is not used in continuation only in crucial moments, as happens in the case of the character Bedrije, the sanitary of the newspaper editorial staff in the *Winter*. This makes that the "transition" in standard to be very easy. Considering even this level of

⁷ This happens often in the other work of the diptych, *The Winter*.

⁸ For more on this topic, see Vehbiu 2007.

words or locutions, however, Kadare's work with the varieties and dialects of Albanian language has been extensive. As has been mentioned, in relation to Gheg dialect, has been proved the usage of approximately one thousand and two hundred words and its locutions, even in works of a totally southern subject and colour.⁹

Like Joyce, even Kadare appears really attentive to discourse registers. The old woman, street cleaner, bureaucrat, and many other types of characters appear clear with their respective specific registers. However, in a context where "the iron rule of the traditional novel, the real interconnection of important events" (Eco 1966: 71) was very difficult to be violated, it was impossible for Kadare to naturally implement in his work discourse registers from lower and marginal strata which even today would be considered unworthy for art by many readers of Albanian literature. Joyce, on the other hand, was determined to introduce in literature aspects of everyday language that were never presented before, and he knew and presented well the language of most marginal strata of population, as is for example the speech of the lowest prostitutes (Burgess 1973: 172-3). Again, it can be argued that despite differences in degree, even in this point of view Joyce served as a reference to Kadare, in that amount that could be done in the Albanian letters of that period.

Joyce relied more than any other writer before him on the empirically verifiable events of a specific place and time, by drawing his details from newspapers, maps and contemporary guidebooks of Dublin with a passion that went far beyond the naturalistic quest for verisimilitude (Spoo 1994: 4). In his virtuosity with the technique of pastiche or parody, as an imitation of an existing artistic style so close and skilful as to be indistinguishable from the original, he referred to a variety of styles as newspapers, women magazines of the early XX century, or more specific literary styles of authors or different periods.¹⁰ In Kadare's work, this aspect has not received a sufficient scholarly attention. However, even in a more general overview, it is impossible not to notice that Xani's speech, the photographer of ATSH in *The Winter* (who among other photos selects one which shows that "Enver Hoxha has a great sadness"), has an incredible similarity with that of memories of Sulo Gradeci (ex security chief of Hoxha), parts of which were published immediately after the death of the dictator.¹¹ This coincidence has no reason to surprise, as it is known that in the process of writing this work, Kadare had the possibility to widely exploit archival sources of Party Central Comity, and the descending in the achieve basement of which the scholar Mandalà has compared to the descending that Dante had done to describe his "inferno" (Mandalà 2018: 36). In the same degree of convincing veracity is given the self-criticism of *The Concert*. In this sense, a comparative research of Kadare's work with the specific registers of communication would be of great interest. What is really impressive however is the genuineness with which all these discursive layers are combined into Kadare's own language and style.

⁹ For more, see Kadare, *Vepra*, vol. XX, p. 427.

¹⁰ See especially Burgess 1973: 93-106.

¹¹ See Sulo Gradeci, *Prijësi me zemër të madhe*. In: Nëntori 1985, nr. 10. Another reference can be: Astrit Nuri, *Flamurtarët e mësimëve të Enverit*, pp. 91-95.

Conclusions

Ismail Kadare and James Joyce have interesting similarities at the level of their literary language. Both writers have contributed a lot in the elaboration of each respective language by mastering it in a superior level of expression, one of the most apparent aspects of which is their expansion of lexis. At a second, more specific level, they both gave emphasis to the visual aspect of language, as is witnessed by their fondness of anagrams, backward writing, specific spellings, etc. Even more important is their attentiveness regarding the sound aspect of language, pushed to the limits by Joyce, but persistently pursued also by Kadare. A third level of commonality is the frequent use of foreign words by both writers. Without going to the limits of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, Kadare's geography of foreign words is conspicuous: from Russian to German, from Chinese to Swedish. Lastly, both writers had an incomparably sharp sensitivity to discourse registers, representing convincingly characters from a wide range of social strata, some of them traditionally excluded from literary language. Kadare's remarks on Joyce's "multilingual delirium", his attempt to "create the language of water and wind", etc, show clearly that these similarities in language are not fortuitous, and that Joyce was an important reference point in Kadare's explorations in literary language.

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