Writing with or against National Identity

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Panel: Writing With (and Against) National Identity

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But the national identity of whom: a poet, a writer? It’s hard for me to believe that a good writer or poet could write with, or even against identity. I think the real, and the only real, national identity for a writer is inscribed in the language he has chosen in which to write and the cultural currents he has chosen in which to swim. As the political borders in Europe are fading out, what does a writer or poet do? She or he must do the same thing that was done over the epochs with their fellows all over the world in order to write well: to dream the same persistent old dream: to be like the good cheese of any valley, local but well known all over the world.

In my viewpoint, Albanian culture is a typical post-colonial culture. Escaping from a tragic half-century long dream, in order to rearrange my relations with the world, paradoxically, I began with my valley. With a book of poems based totally on home-grown topics: The Circumference of Ash (I think it is worth mentioning that this book won the national prize). By using strong metaphors in an attempt to rebuild a scattered national identity, I began my journey to the world. I felt the longing for the culture of the world. I felt what Laforgue felt 100 years ago, “To see my European brain run through fields, hills and faces.” Like my fellow Albanian poets, I felt, and feel, that I am what Whitman felt himself to be: “A nobody, a nation.”

But turning back to the topic of the panel, even if a homogeneous and stable Albanian identity could be ever found, would writers necessarily draw on it and reflect it in their works? Those who stress the importance of an author’s nationality, Albanian or otherwise, implicitly assume that the author is both a passive product and a mirror of his or her era. The Albanian writer becomes at once a sponge and a filter for all things "Albanian." Yet writers are more than products of their culture. The creative mind can supersede the limits of its inputs. Placing undue relevance on an Albanian writer’s citizenship implies that the writer is what he writes, that the act of writing is necessarily a presentation of a uniquely Albanian self. But writers routinely overcome their environmental boundaries and write outside of their cultural context.

Many world literatures are used as cultural indicators by both readers and historians. When a text is touted as Albanian, it is assumed that between its lines lies a uniquely Albanian expression of creativity, perhaps even an insight into what it is like to be Albanian. But one voice, or even a small collection of voices, even if they are the most creative, honest, and patriotic voices of all, cannot speak for such a diverse country. Writers do not define a nation; they produce small microcosms into which its citizens can escape. Writers are not elected. They are not representative. Saying with any conviction, "This is Albanian," removes writing from the realm of fiction and transposes it into reality, infusing it with the responsibility of the expression.

Assigning Albanian identity to a work also makes us feel like the work belongs to us other Albanians, somehow—that we are not only consumers of the text, but contributors as well. Why are we proud when an Albanian is praised in literary, or any other, circles?—because we
as a nation have produced this winner. Lack of support for the Albanian arts (including all things literary) would suggest otherwise, but when an Albanian writer gains international acclaim, we claim it as our own, with pride. After all, it is Albanian.

It is natural to want a unified set of qualifying cultural elements, and to want these elements expressed beautifully in a national body of literature wherein each text reflects a uniquely Albanian perspective. Such homogeneity leads to a comfortable sense of cultural identity, and contributes to national pride. This, however, is not the Albanian reality. Albanian texts are as different as Albanians themselves, and reflect vastly divergent life experiences, perceptions, and methods of expression. The sheer variety of works produced by Albanian authors is a testament to our diversity; describing them as simply "Albanian" is too simple to be truly meaningful.

The question of an author's nationality might seem unproblematic, but identity—whether of an individual, nation, or other group—is far from simple. This Topic gives us an opportunity to explore what determines national identity. Is it birth? ancestry? passport? language? culture? What is an Albanian author?

Oscar Wilde said that the truth is rarely pure and never simple, and he could have said the same thing about the cultural identity question.

Albanian society has an extraordinary capacity to assimilate new elements through all its major phases. Far from providing a basis for doctrines of racial purity, they seem to take pleasure in the fact that identity is seldom straightforward, but is more often a matter of negotiation and exchange.

In their various incarnations throughout history, the struggles for Albanian sovereignty have been the subject of much of Albanian writing, and the artistic responses to and representations of these struggles have been as diverse as the authors who write about them. The writers represent not the unity and distinctiveness of the Albanian, or whatever experience, but rather its complexity, hybridism, and differences.

A good book must resist the national label. A good writer must resist his country, or his national identity. In my opinion the most dangerous thing for a writer who has decided to live in his country, is his familiarity with it, a kind of grave intellectual myopia. I agree fully with what Cortazar wrote many years ago, that “The greatest exile for a writer is to live in his country.” And this exile is complete even with his native language. It is by this perspective a writer could define or foretell an identity, or better said, a redefinition of his identity, of his readers, of his people, as well as of his nation.